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OR,

BLACK LARIAT'S BLOT-OUT.

A STORY OF

THE COLORADO DESPERADOES.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BOY'S VOW.

"EVERY man of that band shall die, boy
though I am, I swear it!"

This burst of passion over, the speaker

UP WENT THE KEEN KNIFE OF BUFFALO BILL CUTTING THE LASSOES LIKE STRING.

looked about him upon a scene of death and ruin, and, throwing himself full length upon the ground, buried his face in his hands and wept bitter, scalding tears.

Toward the spot where he lay, unconscious of all about him now save his overwhelming grief, came a horseman across the prairie at a rapid lope.

Nearer and nearer he came, until his eyes, falling upon the scene of a ruined house, he drew rein suddenly and his face became white and stern as he muttered: "There has been red work here! Ah! there lies one of the victims still alive."

Quickly he threw himself from his horse, and, bending over the form, said gently:

"My poor fellow, are you—"

The one he addressed was upon his feet in an instant, his face stained with tears, his eyes inflamed and his whole form quivering with emotion.

The horseman saw a youth of seventeen, well grown, of athletic build, with a daring, handsome face, and clad in buckskin leggings, stuck in top boots, a gray hunting shirt and a slouch hat, while about his waist was a belt of arms—his hand falling upon a revolver as he sprang to his feet.

"No! no! You are not one of that accursed band; you wouldn't do a wrong!" And the youth looked into the face of the horseman as one might who was intuitively reading his very soul.

"Some great wrong has been done you, my lad, if this is your home," gently spoke the horseman.

"It was my home, sir, and a happy one; but see it now! All gone, and those I loved lie dead over yonder in those bushes—dead, murdered! my poor father and mother and my little brother, and I alone am left!"

"See, sir! Look around you and see what they have done!"

The youth pointed about him to the charred timbers of what had been a large cabin home and outhouse, the ranch of some prosperous settler, but all now a scene of desolation.

The horseman did not speak, but walked quickly over to the bushes, where the youth had said the dead lay, and there beheld a man of forty, a woman several years his junior, and a lad of fourteen.

All were dead, and bullet wounds in their heads showed how they had died.

The youth gazed upon the dead with white, stern face, for he had gained control of himself now, and the horseman asked:

"Who did this red deed, my lad?"

"Indians, sir."

"It was done last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you?"

"Away on a hunt, sir, with several comrades from the other ranches."

"Are other homes destroyed also, for I know there are ranches to the north of here?"

"I do not know, sir, for I left the boys to come on home—and this is what I find." And the lips quivered and eyes dimmed.

The horseman made no reply, but began to move about the grounds, his eyes taking in everything in a way that showed the experienced plainsman.

The youth stood watching him, with intense interest noting all that he did.

He even, in his great grief, observed that the stranger possessed a superb form, was over six feet in height; his dark, waving hair fell upon his broad shoulders, and he was dressed in a pic-

uresque costume and broad sombrero, all of which was most becoming to him.

About his waist was a sash and a belt of arms, and, glancing toward the stranger's horse, which had been allowed to roam at will and feed, he saw a splendid animal, handsomely equipped with bridle, saddle and camping outfit, while a rifle hung to the horse upon one side and a looped lariat upon the other.

The youth was much impressed with the stranger, and his appearance, and muttered:

"Who can he be, I wonder?"

Having completed his survey of the surroundings of the ruined home, the stranger walked to where the bodies lay and bent over them.

He seemed to try to read from their faces what he would know—to expect the dead lips to open and tell him the cruel story of their death, so intently did he scrutinize them.

Bending over the body of the little lad, he took something from between his fingers; then he proceeded to fold the hands of all peacefully upon their breasts.

"There are more, sir," faltered the youth.

"More dead?"

"Yes; my old negro nurse, who came with us out here, and her husband. They lie over yonder, in the edge of the woods, and our two cowboys are further along, where they fell fighting."

"Those are all, sir."

"All! and seven of them! All from one household! And you alone are left, my brave lad."

"I am the last, sir; but I can avenge those who are gone, and I will! I will! I have sworn it, and I will take the trail of those Indians and—"

"Boy, you are wrong; all wrong."

"Do you mean to say that I shall not avenge my dead?" fiercely demanded the youth. And his hand again dropped upon his revolver, for it flashed upon him that the stranger was not his friend after all, to make such a remark.

"I did not say that you should not avenge, but I meant that you must not punish the innocent for the guilty, for *Indians did not do this work of death!*" said the stranger, impressively.

CHAPTER II.

TELL-TALE SIGNS.

The youth looked at the stranger in a startled, doubtful way, as though he could not believe that he had heard him aright, when he told him that Indians had not done the atrocious deed there in evidence before them in all its horror.

The stranger, as the youth had pointed out where the other bodies lay, had gone, first, to where the two negroes had fallen, then to where the cowboys had ended their lives.

He had looked well at the bodies, then at the surroundings of each, and, apparently satisfied in his mind, he had told the youth that Indians were not the guilty ones.

"You say that Indians did not do this deed, sir," almost gasped the youth.

"Indians did not do it, my little friend."

"But, sir, we crossed the Indian trail going and coming this way."

"Who did?"

"My pards and I."

"Who are they?"

"There are five of us, sir, and we are all boys."

"I am the captain, and we scout around to prevent the settlement from being surprised by redskins; but we did not believe any were on the warpath, and so went on a hunt toward the Rio Grande."

"Coming back, we crossed a fresh Indian trail leading from the settlement, and it frightened us; but soon after we came upon the same trail going to the settlement."

"This fairly scared us, and we each rode toward our homes, *and this is what I found.*" And the youth very nearly gave way to his grief once more.

The stranger had listened attentively to the boy's story, and then asked: "How many ranches are in this valley?"

"Nine."

"How many people are on them?"

"Cowboys and families all told, about sixty, sir."

"And you are one of five scouts who patrol the country to guard against surprise by redskins?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did you go on your hunt?"

"Two days ago."

"How far is it to the nearest ranch?"

"Eight miles, it is called, sir."

"And the other ranches lie up the valley beyond?"

"Yes, sir."

"How far do you call it to the Indian country?"

"Some sixty miles to the borderland, sir."

"Did you notice the force in the trails you saw going and coming, my lad?"

"About twenty in the one coming in, and twice that many going back."

"I see that your cattle and horses were not taken." And the stranger pointed to a large herd of cattle feeding a couple of miles away and a band of a hundred horses nearer.

"Some of the horses appear to be missing, sir."

"Did you notice whether the trails you saw were of shod or unshod hoofs?"

"No, sir."

"They were of unshod hoofs."

"How do you know, sir?"

"All the tracks about here are of horses that are shod, and you'll find that the raiders rode hard in coming here and left their worn-out animals and took fresh ones from your drove, and as many as they could carry along at a good pace."

"Oh, sir, you seem to read the signs well."

"It is my business to do so; and let me show you this and ask if it is an Indian's hair."

He held up a bunch of hair of reddish hue, evidently torn from a human head.

"No, sir; it is a white man's hair."

"I got it from the hand of your little brother, for he tore it from the head of his murderer in the struggle."

"Poor Sammy!"

"Here is a spur I picked up. Is it yours, your father's, or the cowboys'?"

"It belonged to none of us, sir."

"Indians don't wear spurs nor ride iron-shod horses, and these are not ponies' tracks. Nor do they have hair like this. So, though those who were here did all they could to appear to be redskins, being painted like them even, they were white men."

"How do you know that they were painted?" asked the boy, in some astonishment.

"You will find paint smeared on your father's clothes, rubbed off in the struggle with his foes, and also on the face and hands of your brother, and of the negro man, too, proving that they all had a death grapple with their slayers."

"No, white men, not Indians, did this fiendish deed."

"But who can they have been?"

"I am a stranger here, merely passing through with important dispatches from fort to fort, so I know nothing of your

people; but *you* should know if your family had bitter foes who would perpetrate such a hideous deed.

"Are there not outlaw bands in this part of the country?"

"Yes, sir, there are the Red Rovers—a band of outlaws who rob and kill without mercy; but they have never been in Meadowland Valley."

"Well, my poor lad, my duty calls me on my way; but I shall stop at the ranches as I pass and send you help at once."

"If they have not also been ruined, sir."

"Ah, yes; but it can hardly be."

"See, yonder come some horsemen now, so we will be ready for them if they prove to be foes."

"They are my pards!" shouted the boy as he turned his gaze upon the four horsemen whom the stranger had caught sight of, coming at a run up the valley.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIVE FERRETS.

"Your pards?" asked the stranger quickly, at the words of the youth.

"Yes, those four and I make the five I spoke of—the Fighting Five some in the valley call us, while others give us the name of the Five Ferrets, as we have always found out when a raid was to be made."

"They are coming rapidly, as though bearing news of importance."

"Perhaps they have the same story to tell of death and destruction."

"No; I am confident those men did not go down the valley, for they doubtless struck your home just before daylight, and had they then gone on in their work of ruin we would now see the smoke of the burning ranches."

"And besides, they were not in force enough to attack settlers of large number in their own homes and by daylight."

"No; for some purpose they came here, and, accomplishing their fatal mission, they have gone to seek safety and let the redskins get the censure of their crime."

"You speak like one who knew, sir, and I believe you are right," said the boy sadly, and he added: "I certainly will be glad to know that no one else has had to suffer as I do."

The stranger now had his eyes upon those rapidly approaching where he and the youth stood.

He saw that there were four of them, and that they were mere boys, being about the same age, but, like the youth by his side, well grown, strongly built, and clad as he was; they were thoroughly armed and well mounted, he noticed, also.

They dashed up a moment after, four abreast, leaped from their saddles, and in silence ran up and grasped the hands of their comrade.

At first the hard-stricken youth seemed about to break down utterly, but he was of stern courage and decision of character—the quality that controls the make-up of strong natures—and, mastering his emotion, he said in a low voice:

"Pards, you see that I am left all alone, and homeless."

"Here lie my parents and Sammy; over there is Maum Jinnie and Uncle Peter, and yonder are the two cowboys, Lige and Burt."

"Did the human fiends go down the valley?"

"No, Bird, they went back to the mountains."

"We saw the smoke of your home soon after we left you, and gave the alarm in the valley, and then came here with all speed."

"Is it too late to followed them?" asked Kane Noland. And his eyes as he spoke were dim with tears of heart-strung sympathy, while the rest of the brave band of boys seemed too full for utterance as they gazed about them upon the scene of desolation and suffering.

"It is too late now, boys, to follow them, but they shall answer for this—every man of that band—for I know that you will help me in the work of avenging this act," said the youth in a voice full of determination.

At once came the reply, strangely stern and threatening, from the lips of each one of the four youths:

"We will stand by you to the end, Bird—even to the death, if necessary."

"I know that well, pards."

"Yes, the redskins will suffer for this," said Nick Walter, while Bird Bainbridge, who seemed to be the leader of the five, broke in with:

"But redskins did not do it, boys."

"Who says so?" came in a chorus of voices.

"This gentleman—I do not know his name."

He turned to the stranger, who had been quietly observing the youths, as if reading each one of them through and through with his piercing gaze.

They had also taken particular notice of him, in spite of the scene they had come upon, and their grief for their companion, wondering who he was.

At the hint of Bird Bainbridge to know who he was all eyes were now upon the stranger, while Seth Saunders echoed incredulously: "Indians did not do it?"

"That is my opinion, my young friend, though we are all liable to err."

"Why, who else could or would do such a deed but Indians?" Bud Rainey asked.

"I say that white men, disguised as Indians, did this red work, and I have seen as much cruelty among some of the palefaces on this frontier as ever the Indians were guilty of," said the stranger.

"Then you uphold the Indians, sir, in their acts?" somewhat hotly intimated Seth Saunders.

The stranger smiled, and replied with no show of anger:

"I am an old plainsman, though still a young man comparatively. I have seen the basest of acts committed by Indians upon this border; but I have seen their every act of cruelty and death equaled by the deeds of white outlaws and renegades, with this difference, that, where the redskins have been trained from infancy to fight in their own cruel way against women and children as well as men, and to regard the palefaces as their natural foes, driving them from their own homes, the outlaws, fleeing from justice for crimes committed elsewhere, come here and act toward their own race with a degree of inhumanity that the savage cannot surpass."

The stranger spoke so impressively that all the boys felt the truth of his utterances, and Bird Bainbridge asked:

"Will you tell us who you are, sir?"

"My name is William F. Cody, but I am better known as Buffalo Bill, chief of army scouts in the Northwest."

CHAPTER IV.

BUFFALO BILL.

"Buffalo Bill!"

The name was echoed by each one of the five under his breath—uttered in an almost incredulous tone.

The "Five" seemed hardly to credit their hearing. Could it be that they stood face to face with a man of whose

daring deeds they had heard even before they came to find a home in New Mexico upon ranches situated in the very midst of incessant danger?

They had read of him in their homes far from the scenes of his exploits; they had heard of him around the hearthstone of their new habitations; had listened to stories told of him by rancheros and hunters about the campfire.

They knew him especially as the ideal hero of the cowboys, and even then two of the lads had in their saddle pockets romances of the great scout's career.

Buffalo Bill!

The name had a wonderful charm.

It was the open sesame of their hearts! Could it really be their hero?

Was not the stranger deceiving them? No! It was he—the scout of scouts!

They looked into his frank, fearless, handsome face—the face of a marvelous man!

They regarded his splendid physique—it was the form of a hero.

They scanned his picturesque frontier garb—it was just such as a hero should wear!

Then they glanced at his splendid horse and complete outfit, the rifle and lariat hanging to the saddle horn—all were just what the make-up of a hero should be!

No, there could be no mistake. Buffalo Bill stood before the five young frontier fighters of Meadowland Valley.

"You must pardon me, sir, for saying what I did," said Seth Saunders, frankly retracting his words.

"Don't think of it again, my boy. Now, let me tell you that I have been trying to think how I can serve our young friend here, whom you have promised to aid in his determination to avenge this most foul crime against those he loved."

"Oh, sir, if you only *would* help us!" cried Bird Bainbridge, while the others chimed in with:

"Yes, sir, if you only would."

After a moment of thought, the Knight of the Plains addressed the youths:

"I am chief of scouts up at Fort Fetterman, and am carrying important dispatches, which of late have failed to get through, along the chain of forts to Fort McRae, in the Tule Rosa Range."

"My orders for haste are imperative, but when I return to Fetterman I am to have a leave of absence, and I promise you that, instead of going to my home in Kansas to spend it, as was my intention, I will return here and aid you to hunt down the fiends who committed this atrocious deed."

The boys together broke out in a cheer, waved their hats and seemed to feel as though the murderers were already run to earth!

"It is so good of you, sir, to help me." And Bird Bainbridge extended his hand, which the chief of scouts grasped warmly.

The other lads, taking advantage of the situation, also offered their hands, proud to get a grip from the great plainsman.

"It is not kind of me, but my duty, to help you," continued Buffalo Bill.

"I have told you that the murderers were not redskins, in my opinion, but white men. I am more than ever convinced of it now; but let this belief be kept a secret between us."

"You all understand?"

"Yes, sir," was the prompt reply from each one of the five.

"If they learn that they, not the Indians, are suspected, they will be forewarned, hence forearmed, and thus have a chance to cover up their tracks or to leave the country."

"If they know that Indians alone are suspected, they will be reckless, and can be the better tracked or identified."

"That is true, sir," assented Bird Bainbridge, and all echoed his words, for the five would have endorsed anything Buffalo Bill wished them to think or do.

"Now you must let no one into this secret of our suspicions, but proceed quietly to work to find out what you can."

"You are to be, in fact, detectives, ferrets, to trace and spot the guilty ones."

"Get all the information you can, and I will meet you here in just six weeks from to-night."

"If I do not come it will be because I am dead, or wounded, and I shall see to it that there is one to take my place should I fail you, for I have friends and assistant scouts at Fort McRae."

"But I will be here if possible, and, should we meet meanwhile, elsewhere, do not appear to know me, unless I first recognize you."

"We won't, sir; but you will know us by the silver star you see we wear on our hats."

"Yes, I will not forget my Fighting Five, and let me warn you that you must be ready for serious work when I return."

"Have your best horses and weapons; don't neglect your lariats, for I look upon the lasso as a most effective and dangerous weapon when skilfully handled."

"Have your supplies near to get at in a moment of time, for when I put in an appearance I will have done some ferret work on my own account, and when I want you it will be like the Texan and his gun—*want you bad*."

"But I notice quite a party of horsemen coming up the valley, and, as I do not care to be seen by them, I must be off."

"Remember, six weeks from to-night, if you do not hear from me sooner."

"Good-by, boys!" And, with a quick step, Buffalo Bill reached his horse, leaped into his saddle, turned into the timber, and disappeared at a gallop, leaving the Five Young Fighters speechless with admiration and joy at their good luck in having for their ally their hero of heroes.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST OF HIS RACE.

The scout had been gone five minutes before any one of the five spoke.

Each one was too deeply impressed by all that happened—the wiping out of the Bainbridge home and dwellers, and the meeting with Buffalo Bill; their food for reflection kept them silent.

In the mean time the party of horsemen now coming up the valley had drawn nearer; they were a score in number, and were riding rapidly.

The boys knew them as the ranchers and cowboys hastening to the scene after the warning spread by the four companions of Bird Bainbridge, for so the popular youth was called by the cowboys, though his real name was Burr.

There were old men and young, ranch owners and cowboys, in the cavalcade. They were coming to see what harm had been done, and if Indians were really raiding the upper end of the valley.

All knew the Bainbridge home as the best in the valley. Mr. Bainbridge had moved there from a Texas ranch. He was in fairly good circumstances when he came, so had made himself and family most comfortable.

He had a good band of ponies, a large herd of cattle, a hundred acres of land under use or cultivation; so there was the appearance of substantial and prosperous home upon all about him.

It was said that he had left a fine ranch in Texas, selling out at a sacrifice for cash to move up into New Mexico, though just why no one could tell, for little really was known of his actual history.

He was a handsome man of forty-five, and his wife was a beautiful woman, while their two sons, Burr and Sammy, were bright, handsome, daring boys, who had been well brought up and well taught by their parents, both of whom were people of education and refinement.

They had brought with them the old negro, Peter, and his wife, Jinnie, as also the two cowboys who worked upon the ranch in Texas.

When settling there, Mr. Bainbridge had employed a number of men to build his house and outbuildings, fence in his fields, clear the land and put it in grain, paying them liberally for their work, which few of the widely scattered settlers could do.

If there was a skeleton in the closet of the Bainbridge home, as was hinted in Meadowland Valley, no one had been found to unearth it, nor to ascertain just what it was.

All understood that there was some mystery in the lives of the Bainbridge family, some special cause for their leaving Texas; but neither the two young sons, the negroes, or the cowboys had ever given the secret away, if there was one and they knew it.

Still, the family was popular with all, and when Bird Bainbridge had organized the small band of ranchers' sons of about his own age, as the Silver Star Scouts, to protect the valley from a raid, all the settlers had been glad of it, and especially as the gallant lads had rendered most excellent service on more than one occasion.

All the youths were dead shots, could throw a lasso with great skill, ride anything in the shape of a horse, and had the pluck of true border boys to back up their accomplishments.

They never had given a false alarm—never cried "Injun!" when there was no "Injun"—and under their able young leader and trainer had become great favorites, and were most thoroughly trusted.

The Bainbridge home was delightfully situated—the large cabin, encircled by piazzas, standing upon a hill, at the edge of some fine timber, and with a large creek running near.

A grand view was obtainable down the valley, and of the lands where the cattle grazed.

It was well furnished for a frontier home, and happiness seemed to dwell there in spite of the haunted, anxious look that ever seemed to rest in the eyes of Burr Bainbridge the senior.

In one fell swoop this ideal frontier home had been wiped out.

Not only had the dwelling, but the outbuildings, been left in ashes, while, as narrated, the bodies of the ranchero, his wife, little son and four faithful servitors had been left dead amid the ruins.

The boy who remained, as far as all others knew, was the last of his race, the sole survivor of Bonaventura Ranch, as Mr. Bainbridge had called his new home.

Amid this scene of rapine and ruin, of deadly hate and vengeance, the Fighting Five stood as the settlers dashed up the valley.

The horsemen, as they came in at a full gallop, drew their horses to a walk as they came first upon the two cowboys lying dead by the side of the trail.

Then the bodies of the negroes were seen, and as the men drew nearer their

hats were doffed, their heads bared in the presence of the dead rancher, his wife and little Sammy.

Not a word was spoken as they drew rein and confronted the sole survivor of the once happy and prosperous home, until at last a white-haired settler cried with choking voice:

"My God! All gone!"

"My boy, the red fiends have dealt you a cruel, a merciless blow."

"Heaven have mercy upon you, for human sympathy can not console for such as this."

CHAPTER VI.

LASSO SOL'S ACCUSATION.

"Where are the red fiends that did this?"

"You, Bird Bainbridge, are a good trailer; you have been the sufferer; and, boy though you are, I for one will follow your lead to avenge those you loved."

The speaker, one of the settlers, spoke in quivering voice. His hair and beard were iron gray; age was in his frame; yet he avowed his purpose to follow a boy's lead.

"And I will go, too," cried another, and along the line ran the cries:

"Count me with you, Bird, to the end!"

"Me, too, boy pard!"

"I am another."

"Not a man can back down with this sight before his eyes."

"Hooray for our young captain!"

So the offers of aid were volunteered. The brave boy was touched deeply, and his lips quivered with repressed emotion.

But it was time now for action, not tears.

The first terrible blow at the discovery of the dead was over. There could be nothing more to come to him then, he knew.

Whatever he felt, no matter how his heart was torn, he would be a man.

"My friends, I thank you all, and if some of those not so well able to stand a hard ride will remain to care for my dead, I will be glad to have those who will go with me to follow on the trail of those whose deed of death is before you," and the youth spoke in a manly and firm tone, while his four immediate pards looked at him with surprise in the face of what Buffalo Bill had told them.

Bird Bainbridge saw their looks, and said in a low tone:

"We must know where this trail leads, for that is our first duty."

The justice of this the other boys saw, and it was decided that ten of the best mounted and hardiest of men should accompany the five youths on the trail, the half score others remaining behind to go into camp there, send for aid to the other ranches, and prepare for the burial of the dead on the morrow.

"But there was some one here with you, for we saw him ride off quick as we came up," said one of the settlers, a man who dwelt alone in his cabin and had a few cattle he herded.

In the settlement he was known as Lasso Sol, and by no other name, while he was said to have been a guide and hunter.

He was a large man, quick in his actions, had a stern, hard face, and was admitted to be the best hand with a lariat on the border, and he had been the one to give the Five Silver Star Scouts their lessons in throwing of the rope.

But all in the valley rather feared Lasso Sol than liked him, and his question as to who was the horseman who had ridden off as they approached caused several others to call out:

"Yes, who was he, boys?"

As spokesman for the Fighting Five, Bird Bainbridge replied:

"He was Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts in the army, up in the Northwest, and he was bearing important dispatches to Fort McRae."

"He was in a hurry or would have stopped longer."

"All a lie, young pard, fer Buffalo Bill don't come down into this country, and I'll bet my guns and horse that he were a renegade white man who led them Injuns here, and then sneaked back ter see how well he had done ther biz."

"He's no more Buffalo Bill than I is, and my guns and horse says so."

"I'll take you up at that bet, Lasso Sol," hotly said Bird Bainbridge, to the surprise of all, while one cried:

"There, Lasso Sol, it's buck or back now. Prove he hain't Buffalo Bill or pay up."

"I'll win my bet."

"Here, Reddy, I wants you, and you too, Barney, ter go with me and rope thet fine feller in, and show he's what I says he is."

"Would you go and take men with you, Lasso Sol, when every man is needed now to go on the trail or remain here, and do his duty to the dead?" said the elder settler reproachfully, and who, next to Mr. Bainbridge, had been looked upon as a leader in the valley, for the slain rancher was the acknowledged head of the settlement.

"Let them as wants ter go on ther trail on a fool's errand and them as wants ter stay here do so; but I knows my business, and I says thet feller as ran away was a renegade white man who led them Injuns and I goes ter bring him back, and you, Reddy and Barney, goes with me, so git inter saddles and come right along." And Lasso Sol turned toward his horse, the two men named doing likewise, while some of the settlers expressed their regret that the force should be divided.

But Lasso Sol was determined to have his way, and he rode off on the trail of Buffalo Bill, followed by Reddy and Barney, who seemed to enjoy going after one man much more than pursuing a band of Indians.

And, with a glance at his dead, a sad, silent farewell, Bird Bainbridge also rode away with his men, but not until he had whispered to one of his Five, Seth Saunders:

"You know how you can head Buffalo Bill off, so drop off after we start, take the short cut, and tell him that Lasso Sol is on his trail."

CHAPTER VII.

BUFFALO BILL'S DISGUISE.

When Buffalo Bill rode away, at sight of the band of horsemen coming up the valley, he entered a thick belt of timber and kept in its shadow, though the main trail ran in the open as far as the eye could reach.

The scout appeared anxious to avoid being seen by the horsemen, and he then made a wide flank movement by way of the timber and came out into a trail a couple of miles from the Bainbridge Ranch.

In the Meadowland Valley the ranches were all on the north side close under the mountain ranges, to protect them from the cold northerners when they blew.

The main trail ran down the valley therefore, nearer the northern side, and across to the other range were miles of open pasture land.

Close in under the southern range there was plenty of timber land, and a deer trail led through it.

Into this trail Buffalo Bill made his way, as though to avoid being seen by any of the cowboys minding cattle in this valley.

He seemed anxious to avoid each and every ranch, and was going along at a slow canter, as though anxious to make up for his delay at the Bainbridge Ranch, when he saw ahead of him in the trail the tall form of a redskin.

The Indian stood upright, his arms folded upon his broad breast, and his eyes were fastened upon the scout, though not with hostile intent.

He was almost devoid of clothing, being attired in only the breech-clout, moccasins, and a head dress of eagle plumes.

His large arms and body were bare, and shone like bronze as the sunshine fell upon him where he stood.

He wore a red sash about his waist and in it in front were stuck a knife and a revolver, the only weapons he seemed to possess.

"Why, it is the Tonca Chief, Lone Buffalo, and he has recognized me, or he would not stand there," said Buffalo Bill, as he recognized the waiting redskin.

Drawing nearer to him, the scout called out:

"Ho, Lone Buffalo, I am glad to see my red brother."

"Tonca Chief glad to meet great white chief."

"Lone Buffalo see him come and wait—me got tell something."

The scout grasped the hand of the Indian, who seemed pleased at the meeting and said:

"The Tonca is my friend, I know; but does he still live apart from his people, alone in the mountains, as he did when I met him a year ago?"

"Tonca Chief live all alone; hide his face from his people."

"Where White Buffalo go?"

"To the fort."

"Me go too."

"Then I shall have company; but where is your pony?"

"He there, with rifle," and the Indian led the way through the timber for several hundred yards, to where a large roan mustang was staked out, and a saddle, bridle, and rifle lying near.

"Me stop rest pony, see white chief way up trail, go to meet him."

Again Buffalo Bill expressed his pleasure at meeting the Tonca Chief, for he knew well the true worth of the lone redskin.

Once, a couple of years ago, when scouting with some cavalry, he had made a dash into a village of Comanches, and rescued the Tonca, just as his captors were going to torture him to death.

The Tonca was released by the scout, and from that day became the devoted friend of the pale-faces.

Learning that the Chief's tribe had captured an officer and two troopers some months after, Buffalo Bill had boldly entered the Indian village at night, disguised as a redskin, and seeking the tent of the Tonca, had asked him to release the pale-face prisoners.

The Tonca at once went to the tepee where they were under the guard of a brave, led them to where he had left the scout, and told him to take them with him, and that they would find ponies in the valley.

This act made his people furious, and for a while his life was in danger, but he had been a great chief, had served them well, and after a council he was told to go to the mountains and dwell alone.

This was his punishment and he was

told to hide his face from his people, and remain a redskin hermit until the chiefs of his tribe sent for him to return to them.

With a sad heart he obeyed the sentence put upon him, and sought a home in the depths of the mountains, becoming known to whites and redskins as the Lone Buffalo.

But the lone Indian hermit was not idle in his solitude, for, the friend still of the pale-faces, he had several times warned the settlement of danger from Apaches, had given his own people a warning of an attack by foes, and had taken news to the fort of hostile bands upon the warpath, and an intended raid by outlaws upon the stages.

Now, when he said that he had "something to tell," Buffalo Bill was anxious to learn what it was, knowing that the lone chief was his fast friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHIEF'S STORY.

Lone Buffalo, having bridled and saddled his horse, and mounted, he rode alongside of the scout as he once more resumed his way to the fort.

"What has my red brother to tell?" asked the scout, having ridden for nearly a mile in silence, for he knew the Indian nature too well to show any anxiety regarding the communication he had to make.

After a moment the Tonca said:

"Heap bad pale-face, paint like Indian, get ready make war on good pale-face in valley."

"So many," and he held up his fingers until he told off twenty.

"Ah! the outlaws disguised as Indians are to make a raid upon the settlements in this valley, chief?"

The Indian nodded.

"When?"

"One sleep."

"To-night that means?"

Again a nod.

"Where are they?"

"Up mountain."

"Mountain robbers?"

Again a nod.

"How did the chief find out?"

"Hide in tree, bad pale-face come and camp and have pow-wow."

"Lone Buffalo stay in tree two sleeps, get heap tired, but bad pale-face camp and camp."

"Then go, and Lone Buffalo come to tepee, get pony, and ride to tell pale-faces and chief at fort, see great white Buffalo come, was so glad."

Buffalo Bill understood the broken story of the Indian perfectly.

He read that he had seen a band of outlaws coming, had climbed a tree to hide from them, and they had gone into camp right there, remaining for two days, and he had been unable to come down off his perch.

That he had heard the outlaws' plan to disguise themselves as Indians and attack the settlement of Meadowland Valley.

When at last they had broken camp the chief has hastened, as well as his cramped limbs would allow him to do so, to his lone camp, gotten his pony, and was going first to warn the settlement, then to inform the commandant at the fort.

Seeing him, Buffalo Bill, coming, he had waited to tell him.

Thinking it over calmly the scout knew that the chief had seen just what he said he had, but he felt certain that he had gotten the night of the attack wrong.

He questioned the Lone Buffalo as to

what the outlaws had done while in the camp, and when told that they were "making Indians of themselves," the scout was certain that the band was the one that had attacked the Bainbridge Ranch.

Either the chief had misunderstood the time set for the raid, or the outlaws had attacked a night sooner than at first intended.

If they had also intended raiding the valley they had contented themselves with the destruction of the Bonaventura Ranch, and the killing of all who dwelt there, save Bird Bainbridge, the young Silver Star scout.

Finding just when the outlaws had camped, and kept him up a tree, the scout was convinced that the chief's party of "bad pale-faces," and those who had left death and ruin behind them at the Bainbridge home were one and the same.

Coming down the mountain canyons from his lone tepee, the Indian hermit would not have discovered the burning barns, and, striking Meadowland Valley miles below Bonaventura Ranch, he was going to give warning at the first cabin of what might be looked for, and then hasten on to the fort in the hope that a troop of rangers might head off the outlaws before they could escape with their plunder.

"The Lone Buffalo is the brother of the pale-faces, and I will tell the great chief all he has done.

"But the Lone Buffalo does not know that the bad pale-faces attacked the settlement one sleep sooner, and last night killed and destroyed the barns at the head of this valley.

"Then the bad pale-faces fled back toward the mountain, but the white braves of the valley will go on their trail."

The Indian was surprised at what he heard, but did not doubt the scout, who continued:

"I want the Lone Buffalo to tell me if he knows any one of the bad pale-faces?"

"Me know —," and he held up three fingers to denote that he knew that many of the outlaw band.

"Good!

"Now I wish the Lone Buffalo to do something for me."

The chief seemed pleased at this and nodded in the affirmative, showing that he was most willing.

"The Lone Buffalo must take the trail of the bad pale-faces, and find out just where they go, and if they have a retreat.

"When the chief knows let him meet me at the Deep Spring, on the Zuni Plateau six sleeps from now."

"Chief know—he be there."

"All right. I shall be returning by the Zuni trail, by way of Fort Tule Rosa and Fort Wingate, and will bring the Lone Buffalo heap things for himself."

"Lone Buffalo glad.

"He take trail of bad pale-face now."

But as he spoke a horse and rider suddenly dashed out into the trail several hundred yards ahead of them, and they came to a quick halt.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WARNING OF THE SILVER STAR.

The horseman, who so suddenly dashed into the trail ahead of Buffalo Bill and the Indian Chief, drew rein as though to await the coming of the scout.

His appearance did not indicate hostility until he saw the Indian with the scout.

This he had not at first seen, evidently, for he turned, as though to dash away

and halfway made a motion as though to bring his rifle round for use.

The scout, however, recognized at a glance who it was that thus crossed his path.

He saw that the horse was panting, as though hard ridden, and he recognized the rider as one of the Five he had parted from but a short while before.

Seeing that the young scout of the Single Star did not seem to understand the presence of the Indian with him, and whom he doubtless did not know as a friend of the pale-faces, Buffalo Bill waved his hand and called out:

"Hello, my Silver Star Pard. How did you manage to head me off so quickly?"

The youth returned the wave of the scout's hand, and as the latter drew up to where he was, said:

"Does the redskin speak English, sir?"

"Yes, but he is my friend, and yours. It is the Tonca, known as the Redskin Hermit."

"Yes, I have heard of him, sir."

"I met him a while since as I now do you, and we are old friends.

"He was on his way to warn the settlement in the valley of the raid of last night, but supposed it was to be made to-night, and he tells me they were all white men disguised as redskins.

"Lone Buffalo, this is my young friend Silver Star, and I want my red brother to know him."

"Lone Buffalo glad know young brave," and he held out his hand, which Seth Saunders warmly grasped, after what he had been told by the scout of the Indian's intention to warn the settlers of danger.

Then he said:

"But I must talk quick, sir, for I have no time to lose.

"Bird Bainbridge, our leader, you know, sir, told me to come on and warn you of danger."

"I thank him, and you also, my young friend, but what danger threatens me now?"

"Why, sir, the men who came were the settlers, and they saw you ride away, so Lasso Sol said you were the Renegade Chief who led the attack last night on the Bainbridge Ranch, and were not Buffalo Bill, and he called upon two of the cowboys of his stripe to come after you and make you a prisoner."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir; but the other settlers urged him not to do so, and a dozen went off with Bird and the rest of our Five, to follow the trail of the raiders.

"Then Bird told me to cut through the valley timber, head you off, and tell you what Lasso Sol said, and that he, Barney and Reddy were on your trail, and they were very dangerous men."

Not a muscle of Buffalo Bill's face changed as he listened to the youth, and when he had heard all that he had to tell he held forth his hand and said:

"I thank you, and I wish you to avoid these men and return to your young leader.

"Tell him that I will heed his warning to the extent that I will take good care of myself, and Lone Buffalo is with me to help me out.

"Also tell him that I shall act only in self-defense not wishing to harm any settler in the valley.

"Remember what I told you about meeting you at the appointed time, and let me tell you that Lone Buffalo here is our friend and may be with me when I come to meet you.

"Now hurry off the trail, so that

these men will not see you, for it is best that they should not."

The youth was of the same opinion, and with a wave of the hand to the scout and the Indian, he wheeled his horse and dashed away, soon disappearing in the timber.

"Now, Lone Buffalo, we will go on our way quietly and decide what is best to do when they overtake us."

"Lone Buffalo know," was the laconic response of the Indian, and the two rode on their way once more.

The warning of Seth Saunders, that Lasso Sol and two men of his stripe were coming after him, to capture him, set the scout to thinking, though it did not disturb him in the least.

He did not believe the man thought he was a renegade, but, having heard his name, he was doubtless some old foe of his, who sought that opportunity to square any grudge he might have against him, or think he had.

If he could make him appear as a renegade, the settlers, in the humor they would naturally be after the scenes they had come upon, would soon make short work of them.

"We must not kill them, Lone Buffalo, but beat them off in some way, and only, if it cannot be avoided, draw on them," and the scout spoke rather to himself than to the Indian; but the latter understood that he must not kill a white man, save in defense of his own life.

CHAPTER X.

THE MESSENGER'S REPORT.

It was with a feeling of almost despondency that Bird Bainbridge rode away upon the trail of the men who had murdered his family and left his home in ruins.

He believed in Buffalo Bill implicitly and felt that it would do no good, as the raiders had been white men, to follow them.

If Indians they might, loaded down with plunder as they would be, possibly be overtaken and punished.

But white men had planned for their escape beyond doubt before coming upon their fiendish errand.

Then, too, the stand taken by Lasso Sol against Buffalo Bill had been such that all of the Five feared the result.

They knew Lasso Sol as a man whose past was not open for inspection, and he had the name of being in hiding in the valley.

He was a dangerous man, too, and no one had ever doubted his bravery.

The way he could handle his lasso was a marvel, and that it was a deadly weapon in his hands all knew.

The Five also were aware that both Barney and Reddy had been hard citizens before coming to Meadowland Valley.

They had been under the tuition of Lasso Sol in the use of a rope, and were his particular chums.

With three such men going on the trail of Buffalo Bill, it was no wonder that the Five were anxious about him.

Being accused of having been the man who led the Indians against the Bainbridge home, this act stamping him as a renegade white man, each one of the Silver Stars could readily understand that the settlers would make short work of the scout if he could not prove he was indeed Buffalo Bill.

And could he prove it?

That was the question that worried Bird Bainbridge and his pards.

It was this also that added to the deep feeling of gloom resting upon the young rancher who had in a few short hours been left an orphan and homeless.

Riding direct to where he could pick up the trail of the raiders Bird Bainbridge did so, and the party pressed on at a canter.

They wished to go as far as possible on their way before night came on.

Bird was intent, his face stern, and he rode almost as though his whole thought was upon the work in hand.

All of the settlers who were following him had pitied him greatly, and would have fought to the death for him then and there.

Bird Bainbridge did not have his thoughts on the pursuit, however.

He followed the trail mechanically, for he seemed to feel its uselessness.

His thoughts were on the dead, upon the once happy home, and then would turn to a scene he could readily imagine as happening far back down the valley—the attack of Lasso Sol upon Buffalo Bill.

He anxiously awaited for the coming after them of Seth Saunders, and hoped that he had not missed finding the scout.

It soon began to grow too dark to follow the trail further, and a camping place was sought.

The poor youth looked with terrible dread at what the night would be to him with all its bitter memories.

If Seth Saunders would only come and assure him at least that Buffalo Bill was safe.

If he did not come within the next half hour of light he would not be able to find them, for he would not be able to push on at night for fear of leaving the trail.

At last a camping place was found, the horses were stripped of their saddles and staked out, fires were built, and supper was cooking, when suddenly through the darkness the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard.

A moment after Seth Saunders dashed into the circle of firelight, his horse looking as though hard ridden.

"I was just going into camp away over on the hill, when I saw your firelight, and came on."

"You pushed on at a good gait, Bird," he said.

"Yes; but I am so glad that you have come," and leading his pard to one side, while Nick Walter, one of the Five, took care of the tired horse, Bird asked quickly:

"Did you find him, Seth?"

"Yes; headed him off about ten miles down the valley."

"What did he say?"

"He thanked you and me, and did not seem in the least disturbed."

"But I tell you, Bird, I had a scare; in fact two of them."

"How?"

"When I found him he had an Indian with him, and for a moment I thought Lasso Sol might be right; that he was not Buffalo Bill, but a renegade, and I would have to fight for life; but Lasso Sol is away off, for he is the great scout, and the one with him was the Indian Hermit, Lone Buffalo, and his friend."

And Seth went on to tell all that occurred at his meeting with the scout.

CHAPTER XI.

AN OATH OF REVENGE.

A great load seemed lifted from the breast of Bird Bainbridge, when he heard the report of his messenger, and how he had warned the scout and found the Lone Buffalo with him.

"I don't feel anxious about him now, Seth; but what was the other scare you said you had received?"

"Oh, yes.

"Why, I rode into a brook to water my horse, and it was so shallow he moved up the stream some fifty feet, among the bushes.

"Well, I had hardly gotten into a pool for the horse to drink from, when I heard hoofs, and the next instant Lasso Sol and his two pards dashed by.

"I heard him swear at his horse for wishing to stop to drink, and then call out that they dared not halt, or they would not head the scout off at the cliff."

"They intend to ambush him there?"

"Yes, they did intend to, but he was right near the cliff when I met him, so they came out behind him and failed."

"Good!"

"And they cannot head him off anywhere else, but will pick up his trail there and follow him."

"That does not scare me, now, Seth, since you put him on his guard."

"But it was a close shave for you, for had Lasso Sol suspected your errand I do believe he would have killed you."

"I am sure of it, and when I rode back to the ford and looked up among the willows, I saw that only their not looking that way saved me."

"But now you must get some supper and go to sleep, for you look haggard, pard."

Bird Bainbridge forced himself to eat something, and then retired to his blankets.

But when the camp was in slumber he arose, went to where the sentinel was on duty, and told him to turn in, saying: "I can't sleep, Mr. Denny, and you can."

At dawn the party were in the saddle, having been awakened by the young sentinel in time to have breakfast and get ready to start as soon as the trail could be seen.

It was evident that the raiders had been so loaded down with plunder from the ranch that they had been unable to travel rapidly.

Just as the trail begun to look so fresh that even Bird had hope of coming up with them soon, a halt was called.

All could see that there the pursuit must end, for the large trail branched off into a score or more.

Not one of the trails showed more than four horses, and from that point all knew it was useless to go further.

But Bird Bainbridge, though giving up all hope of overtaking the raiders, called his immediate pards about him, and said:

"Boys, you know that I must return now to see my people buried this evening, but we must not give up this trail here, so I am going to ask you to each one take a trail and follow it."

"Drop out as we turn back, so as not to attract attention, and follow your trails until night, and then make toward a common centre and see if you have made any important discovery."

"I will start back this way, as soon as the funeral is over, and will take a trail that you have not, for I will see your tracks, and I will find you."

"If not, I will go to our old camp in the Little Colorado River, and you do the same, so that will be our meeting-place."

"You remember, it is at Deep Spring, near the Arizona line."

With these instructions to his Silver Star Pards, Bird Bainbridge turned the settlers on the homeward trail.

They had not gone very far when he saw that his four young pards had dropped out, and then he said that the others could ride at their leisure, but that he would push ahead rapidly.

All knew his reason well, and a few sought to keep up with his pace, to all be at the sad scene of the burial at Bonaventura Ranch.

But the anxious boy soon dropped each one behind him, and at last, just after the sun had disappeared, he rode over the range and looked down into the valley.

He saw camp-fires about the spot where his home had been, and knew that the settlers were there, and that they were waiting for him.

As he rode down the trail into the valley the full moon peered over the mountain range and lighted up the scene in silvery beauty.

Drawing near to the now sad scene for him he drew his tired-out horse to a walk, and slowly approached the spot.

Still nearer he came, and slipping from his saddle he approached on foot, with head uncovered and bent, for the moonlight shown full upon a scene that then and there indelibly stamped itself in heart and brain.

In a little grove of scattered cedars, upon the bank of the creek, was a group of nearly half a hundred people, men and women.

They stood in a circle about some newly dug graves, three in number, and by the side of which stood rudely made coffins.

There was one large grave for the ranchero, his wife and little Sam.

Another was for the two cowboys, a third for the old negro man and woman.

It was a pitiable, terrible scene.

The kind settlers, with tear-stained faces, had waited until the last for the return of the stricken youth.

But as he came not the last sad rites must be performed.

A prayer fell from the lips of one settler, and as it ended the sweet-toned voices of women rose in music, the men joining in, and

"Rock of Ages cleft for me" swelled upward in a volume of melody.

Within the circle suddenly crept the youth, and dropping upon his knees by the side of his mother's coffin he buried his face in his hands while the voices sang on.

Then the melody was hushed, and all saw the boy's right hand raised on high, his lips muttered as though in prayer, but one who stood nearest to him said that it was an oath of vengeance.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MISSING ONES.

In silent sympathy the kind-hearted settlers joined around the brave youth, as the last shovelful of earth was placed over the graves of his dead, for words were useless then in consolation.

But from one and all came the warm welcome to him if he would enter their homes and let it be his.

"I thank you, oh, so much, one and all."

"But I shall remain right here."

"The cattle are to be cared for, you know, and my Boy Pards will help build a cabin, and this will still be my home."

"I will not be alone, you know, for the dead will be here, the graves."

How every heart bled for the poor youth, and how they urged him to go with them.

But he was firm in his determination to remain, and told how the raiders would soon be back, and his four pards would remain for awhile with him, after the Five had come back from a scout they intended making.

Most of the settlers then rode away for their homes down the valley, but some

remained, and two cowboys were appointed to remain at the ruined ranch and care for the cattle and horses, while others said the trailers would build stockades and get things in shape again.

One by one the trailers dropped in, all tired out, and when dawn came all were there, save the four young scouts of the Silver Star, who had gone off on the mission their leader had sent them.

There were a dozen men ready to go to work when day came, in clearing away the ruin, rebuilding the stockades into which to drive the horses and cattle, when there was danger of a raid, and to put up a small cabin for Bird Bainbridge, who was determined to still make his home there.

But the youth was not to be found, and the store-keeper from down the valley, who had come up with his supply wagon, reported that he had bought a large quantity of provisions and ammunition from him, some extra blankets and other things, and had ridden away about dawn.

The cowboy guarding the ponies reported that he had come to the herd before daybreak, and had taken two of the best animals there, saying that he was going off on a long trail.

It was useless to go after him, for all knew that he would not return until he had accomplished the task he had set himself to do, whatever that was, and so the kind settlers had their breakfast and then went to work with a will.

Every piece of the charred timber of the cabin and outbuildings was burned up, and with a lot of lumber Mr. Bainbridge had had already cut for future improvements on his ranch, a good two-room cabin was built for the lone youth.

A stockade was also put up with newly cut timber, and contributions of household furniture were sent down by the settlers until Bird Bainbridge would find a comfortable, well-furnished cabin upon his return.

After several days of hard work the task was completed, and the kind settlers departed, leaving two volunteer cowboys in charge.

But then arose a deep anxiety for Bird Bainbridge and his pards, for not one of them had put in an appearance.

Where had they gone, and where were they? was the question all asked.

And more, what had become of Lasso Sol and his two companions, who had gone after the scout, whom he denounced as a renegade, and the leader of the red-skin raiders whom all believed to have made the attack on Bonaventura Ranch?

It seemed strange that neither Lasso Sol nor either of his two comrades had returned in the four days that had passed since they had gone on the trail of the scout.

They were known to be men who stayed close at their homes, and why had they not returned?

Had the scout proved too much for the trio?

Had he discovered their pursuit of him and led them into an ambush?

It certainly looked most mysterious that at just such a time eight persons were missing from the valley, Sol and his two companions and the Fighting Five.

Just what it meant no one in Meadowland Valley could comprehend.

CHAPTER XIII.

LASSO SOL FINDS HIS GAME.

Lasso Sol and his comrades knew the Meadowland Valley well, and if Buffalo Bill followed the regular trail down it they felt sure of overtaking him.

They were in too great haste to catch him to take his trail and stick to it.

Then, if he saw them coming, they felt sure he would take to flight and they might not be able to overtake him, well mounted though they were.

So they determined to "cut corners" where they could, get ahead of him and ambush him at a point where there was a high cliff and the trail, through the nature of the country, ran through a narrow grove, the very place for an ambush.

So on they dashed, as soon as they had seen the tracks left by the scout's horse, to where they saw them elsewhere.

They kept to the timber, through thickets and among foothills, in the valley, and at last came out in the trail where they wished to ambush the scout.

They felt confident that they had gotten ahead of him, and were pushing hard when they crossed the shallow stream where Seth Saunders had seen them.

But, not suspecting that a messenger of warning had already gotten ahead of them, they knew not of his presence near them.

But what was their surprise, and almost dismay, to see that the hoof tracks showed that the scout had already passed their intended place of ambush.

And there was another thing that they did not like, and that was the discovery that he was not alone, for they saw unshod hoof tracks along with those of the scout's horse.

This, to their minds, was proof positive that the scout was accompanied by an Indian.

Whatever Lasso Sol really believed as to the one he followed being Buffalo Bill, or a renegade, he did all he could to impress upon his companions that this finding of the tracks of an unshod horse with those of the animal ridden by the scout, was undeniable proof that he was in league with the redskins.

As they had not been able to head him off at the cliff, and there ambush him, there was nothing for them to do but pass him without being seen.

There was no other place where they could ambush him, for they could not trace him without being seen.

"There is one thing, pards, we must not do, and that is use our guns," said Lasso Sol.

"Why not?" growled Barney.

"Well, ef he's ther renegade chief shootin' is too good fer him in ther first place, and then ag'in with him a prisoner, I guesses we kin make tarms with him that will make us three rich—see?"

"How's that?" asked Reddy.

"Jist this way—that he's a rich man, and will give up big money to go free, and after we has got it, then we kin do ther killin', if we wants ter."

"Thet's a good game."

"It is so."

"But suppose ne hain't a renegade, but Buffalo Bill, as ther kids said he wus?" Reddy asked.

"We hain't takin' his word fer thet, with proof agin him."

"What proof, Pard Sol?" cautiously asked Reddy.

"Why, ther murder of them people last night, plunderin' ther homes and burnin' of 'em, while he sets his Injun allies agoin' back to ther village, and he hangs around to see what another raid is worth to him."

"Then his runnin' away when he sees us coming, and more than that, bein' jined on their trail by a Injun, fer thet pony hain't rid by any white man."

This alleged proof of the scout's guilt seemed to be accepted by Barney with-

out discussion, but Reddy again asked: "Yes, but ef he should prove ter be Buffalo Bill, Pard Sol?"

"He can't prove it ef I says he hain't, fer I knows Buffalo Bill better than I does both of yer."

This seemed to be satisfactory evidence even to Reddy, and he said:

"That settles it."

"But no guns is ter be used, yer say?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You kin handle yer lariats in great shape, and you knows what I kin do."

"We'll ride on after him, pretend ter be friends, sling our lassoes when up, and we've got him fast."

"But ther Injun?"

"One of us must rope him, too, so you do that, Barney, while me and Reddy throw for ther wan we is after."

"We kin do it up prime, and you bet we'll win this little game, and if it don't pan out big money, then I'll eat my lariat."

This seemed to settle all satisfactorily, and a short while after, upon going over a rise Lasso Sol called out:

"Thar's our game, pards!"

"The' is loping along, and one is a Injun."

"Now play yer cards as I tells yer and we corral our game."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LASSO THROWERS.

Buffalo Bill and the Indian rode quietly along until they passed the cliff, and then the country was more open about them.

The valley widened a great deal, and now and then, on their left, far in the distance and under the shelter of the northern range, could be seen a ranch.

Occasionally a herd of cattle could be seen far away, being driven to corral by a lone cowboy, as the rest had gone up the valley to the Bonaventura Ranch.

But the scout and the Indian rode quietly along, only waiting for the coming of those whom Seth Saunders had reported upon their trail.

This affair disposed of, the Lone Buffalo would branch off over the range to seek his retreat in the mountains, and then pick up the trail the scout had asked him to follow, and find out what he could regarding the raiders of the night before.

"Coming heap fast," said Lone Buffalo, as he looked behind and saw the three horsemen coming over the ridge.

"Don't appear to see them, but look back and tell me how many."

The Indian nearly covered his eyes in obeying, and held up three fingers to show the number.

"Just what the young Silver Star said."

"Are they riding fast now?"

"Heap hurry."

"How far back?"

"Just come over hill."

"About three-quarters of a mile, then."

"Just ride right along, Lone Buffalo, and don't appear to notice them, or even know of their coming."

"They will not fire upon us, I am sure, but try to lasso us, especially as the leader is Lasso Sol, for that is his way of taking a prisoner."

"Keep your rifle in hand, and do as I tell you."

"White Chief know. Lone Buffalo do as he tell him," was the answer.

Buffalo Bill made no reply, and the two rode on in silence.

Lasso Sol, not wishing to be considered an enemy until he had proven himself one, talked loudly to his companions that they might be heard.

But the scout and the Indian did not look back.

The loud talking of their pursuers, and the sound of the falling hoofs seemed to fall upon deaf ears.

It took nerve in both the scout and the redskin, knowing that foes were upon their tracks, not to look behind them, but they had not done so since Lone Buffalo's discovery of them when they came over the ridge.

Keeping his eye upon the scout, as the three men drew nearer, still talking loudly, and now and then breaking out into a rude, boisterous laugh that was forced, the Lone Buffalo saw him take from his saddle pocket something he did not understand the nature of.

Watching with deepest interest he saw the scout hold it up in such a way that it was a foot or more from his face, and seemed to point over his shoulder.

It was a small looking glass.

Having gotten the glass to reflect the three men, who were a hundred yards away, Buffalo Bill said in a low tone:

"They have no weapons drawn, but each man has his lariat ready to throw.

"When I give the word, catch your rifle in the middle and throw your arm quickly upward and it will protect you from the coil."

"Me know all right," answered the Indian, pleased with the clever way he was to protect himself.

"I will use my big knife, which is as sharp as a razor, and will cut the coils.

"Then we will wheel and cover those fellows with our guns, but don't pull trigger, unless to save your life, for they may believe that I am a renegade."

"Lone Buffalo know," was the laconic rejoinder of the Indian, who understood just what the scout wished to do.

"Ho, pard, is yer deaf, dumb and blind?" called out Lasso Sol, who had begun to be nervous as their coming up behind had attracted no attention whatever.

Neither the scout nor the Lone Buffalo paid the slightest attention to the question.

But the scout had his glass in hand, and raising it, the situation in his rear was at once revealed.

The three men were riding abreast, but were apart, so as to give the swing of their lassoes full play.

Each man had the coil in hand, and, when Lasso Sol's hail brought no reply had begun to twirl it around and around his head, preparatory to throwing it.

But suddenly the scout let go the glass, his knife was now in hand, his spurs touched the flanks of his horse, and he called out to the Indian:

"Now!"

At that moment the coils were launched by the three pursuers, and up went the keen knife of Buffalo Bill, cutting the lassoes like strings, while Lone Buffalo caught the noose aimed at him on the length of his rifle and thus prevented it catching about his neck.

CHAPTER XV.

CAUGHT IN THEIR OWN TRAP.

Lasso Sol had won his name by his skill with the lariat, and few men could equal him in throwing it to dead centre. He had a real talent that way.

Both Barney and Reddy were experts also, and the three men had not the shadow of a doubt but that they held Buffalo Bill and the Indian as already in their power.

They intended to catch them in the toils, then make them prisoners, and Lasso Sol had an idea of what he then intended to do.

The fact that Buffalo Bill and the redskin had calmly ridden on unheeding their presence behind them, as though both men were deaf, caused a feeling of uneasiness to all three.

Was there some trap set for them, and which they could not discover?

With a desire to end the suspense Lasso Sol gave the word, the lassoes were thrown, and when the noose aimed at Lone Buffalo was guarded off by the rifle, and fell harmlessly to the ground, the two that circled over the head of the scout were cut clear in two.

But while the three would-be captors were nonplussed by their failure, the scout and the Indian had their wits about them.

They wheeled their horses about as though on a pivot, and Buffalo Bill, with a revolver in each hand, rode upon the two foes nearest him.

The redskin had also whipped out his revolver and, grasping the rein of the horse, he rushed upon them, and the weapon was thrust into the face of Barney.

Buffalo Bill was the spokesman, and what he said was to the point.

"Hands up, or go under, all of you!"

The horses of the three lasso throwers had come to a sudden halt, as trained to do, when the circle was launched with unerring aim.

The tightening of the rope would have dragged those in the toils from their saddles.

This was what the three men expected. Instead, with their lassoes thrown and useless, their horses thrown back on their haunches, and revolvers covering them, while they had not time to grasp their own weapons, they were caught in the trap the scout had set for them.

They fully realized just why their intended victims had appeared deaf.

Lasso Sol set the example of obedience to the scout's order to hold up their hands, with a promptness that his followers were only too willing to follow.

Riding alongside of Lasso Sol, Buffalo Bill unbuckled his belt of arms, unslung his rifle and dropped them upon the ground.

Then he went to Reddy and did the same.

Lone Buffalo followed the example of his leader with Barney, and the three men were disarmed.

"Well, Lasso Sol, you do not appear to recognize me?" said Buffalo Bill, quietly.

"You is Lightning Eye, the renegade white man who is chief among ther redskins," was the sullen reply.

"You know that you speak falsely, for I am as well known to you as you are to me."

"Who are yer?"

Buffalo Bill winked in a peculiar way and replied:

"As you might not believe me if I introduced myself to you, I shall take you to Fort McRae with me, where the commandant can tell you who I am."

The three men turned pale, for they did not know what the result of their going there would be.

"Say, pard, if I has made a mistake I is awful sorry, 'deed I is! But yer see thar were a Ingin raid on our settlement last night, and seven people kilt, and ther finest home in ther valley wiped out."

"Ther was men led by a white man, and seeing you ride off as we come up we tuk after yer, fer you may know how bad we is feeling over ther raid."

"Yes, but how did you know the Indians were led by a renegade?"

Lasso Sol's face flushed, but he answered:

"Ther Five told us."

"Who do you mean by the Five?"

"Them five Boy Scouts you was talkin' to when you seen us coming."

"Did not the Boy Scouts tell you who I was?"

"No, indeed they didn't, and when we seen you with this Ingin we was sure you was a renegade."

"Why did you not kill us then, when you had every opportunity to?"

"You see we wanted to take yer alive."

"I see."

"Well, I turned the tables on you, and instead of killing you take you alive."

"I shall take you to the fort with me."

"Lone Buffalo, just hand me up those belts of arms, and I'll tie them to my saddle."

The Indian did so.

"Now, search those three gentlemen to see if they have any weapons concealed."

A revolver was taken from an inner pocket of Lasso Sol's shirt, and handed to the scout, who said:

"Now tie the hands of each man behind him, and make the rope fast to his saddle horn."

This the Indian did with skill and dispatch.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BLOW FOR FREEDOM.

Covering the three prisoners with his revolver, Buffalo Bill watched the redskin secure them beyond all possibility of escape.

Then he took his lariat and ran it from bit to bit of their three horses and made the other end fast to his saddle, so that the animals would lead in single file behind him.

This done, he dismounted and walked apart with Lone Buffalo, whom he thanked for his aid, told him to go back and take up the trail of the raiders and to meet him at the spot he had named within a certain time.

The scout then shook hands with the faithful Indian, and going back to his horse mounted and rode on his way, the three horses leading well.

The three men looked anxious as they saw the Indian turn back on the trail they had come, and wondered what it meant.

They were thoroughly awed by the cool manner of the man whom they had felt sure was their prey.

"I say, Pard Buffalo Bill, I—"

"Who told you my name was Buffalo Bill, Lasso Sol?"

"Nobody."

"Why did you call me by that name, then?"

"I didn't."

"Ah, I thought I heard you say Buffalo Bill."

"No, but I did say ef Buffalo Bill were here he wouldn't allow us to be tuk to ther Ingin camp and tortured."

The scout laughed and said:

"You are a sly one, Lasso Sol, but I know you."

"You don't know no bad of me, then?"

"Not of Lasso Sol, as that is your name now, save that you tried to run me down under a false pretense, but suppose I called you Black Lariat, what then?"

Both Barney and Reddy glanced at their companion, leaning well over in their saddles to get a look at his face.

They saw, as the scout did, Lasso Sol's face pale at the question asked him, and the start that he gave also.

But he answered:

"I have heard of Black Lariat, a bad

man up in Colorado, but I don't know him."

"I have the advantage of you, then, for I think that I do," and the scout rode on in silence, while the face of Lasso Sol was full of anxiety.

After awhile he said: "Say, pard, we hain't had no chance to talk together, we three, since we were captured, so jist take us one at a time and ask us who and what we is."

"I know."

"What?"

"Settlers in Meadowland Valley, and who hoped to make capital, or get rid of me by capturing me under the pretended belief that I was a renegade."

"This is why I am taking you to the fort, to prove that I am not."

"We'll take yer word for it now."

"I do not ask you to."

"I intend to convince you."

"You wants ter hang us?"

"What for?"

"For revenge, 'cause we thought you was a renegade."

"That is not my nature, but, as I may ride through your valley again sometime, I wish to have proof of my identity."

"S'pose ther valley is attacked while we is away, fer there hain't any too many men there?"

"You should have thought of that before," and the scout again lapsed into silence, and miles were gone over without a word being spoken.

When the end of the valley was reached a halt was made for dinner, the scout dismounting his prisoners and looking to their horses with his own, but leaving the men still bound.

He cooked dinner for all, while the three men lay all huddled together, as though asleep.

When the meal was ready he said:

"I shall release one of you at a time, to eat your dinner, but, look out if you attempt any nonsense, for I noticed that you were plotting something."

As he spoke, Buffalo Bill approached Lasso Sol, to suddenly see his hands come around from behind him, and his right hand held a revolver, while the command came sharply and with triumph in the voice:

"Now, Buffalo Bill, it is my time."

"Hands up, or you are a dead man!"

Buffalo Bill saw the muzzle of the revolver not five feet from his face, and there was no tremor in the hand that held it.

But to the utter amazement of the three men he said in the lightest vein:

"Fire away, Lasso Sol, and see if you can hit me."

"I'll bet you can't in the six shots!"

Lasso Sol was astounded, but uttered an oath and pulled trigger.

The cap snapped.

Then in rapid succession he pulled trigger five times more.

But each time there was no report, only the snapping of the cap.

Driven to frenzy by his failure, Lasso Sol hurled the weapon at the scout, striking him squarely on the chest, the severity of the blow felling Buffalo Bill as though a bullet had pierced his heart!

CHAPTER XVII. BROUGHT TO BAY.

So sudden and unexpected had been the act of Lasso Sol that the scout was for once caught off his guard.

He had expected a quick surrender of the prisoner, when he found his weapon was unloaded.

Instead, in his dismay and frenzy combined, the man had hurled the weapon with telling aim.

Buffalo Bill was vulnerable, like any other man, and the blow was a telling one, for it knocked the breath from his body and felled him as though he had been struck with a battering ram.

For a few seconds he was unable to move, to collect his senses, though he saw the man spring toward him, while a yell broke from his lips in triumph at his success.

Another instant and he would have had one of the weapons from the scout's belt, but there came a shout of alarm from Barney and Reddy, and down went Lasso Sol with a weight upon his back.

The weight was the form of Lone Buffalo, who had bounded from a thicket near and lighted upon the back of the prisoner.

"Me kill quick, pale face move!"

So said the Indian, and his warning was heeded, for the blow on his back had been a severe one, and he was half dazed by the shock.

In fact, all fight had been knocked out of him.

Springing to his feet, though with an effort, Buffalo Bill said:

"Well, Lasso Sol, you are a good one!"

"But for the coming of Lone Buffalo you would have had me all right."

"I didn't know yer hed told ther Injun ter trail us," growled Lasso Sol, while Barney and Reddy were willing to weep with disappointment.

"I did not tell him to follow us, and had no idea that he was within less than fifty miles of us."

"I put up that little game on you to try you, for I saw Barney gnawing your rope loose while pretending to lie there asleep. So I dropped that revolver, after drawing out the loads, pretending not to see it."

"You bit at the bait only too quick, and my little joke very nearly cost me my life."

Then turning to Lone Buffalo, who stood silently by, he thanked him warmly and asked how it was that he happened to be on hand when so much needed.

"Three bad pale face; White Buffalo all alone."

"Lone Buffalo think bad pale face might kill big white chief, and follow him all right."

"Yes, and it was all right, but I shall see that there is no other chance to better me, for I will not halt again, when I start, until I reach the fort."

The three prisoners at this looked terribly crestfallen.

But Buffalo Bill told the Indian to give them their dinner, one at a time, while he bathed his badly-bruised chest with arnica.

Lone Buffalo seemed to enjoy his dinner, and then aiding the scout to mount his prisoners and tie them to their horses, he again said good-by and took the back trail.

Buffalo Bill rode on his way in no very pleasant mood, for the blow of the revolver in the chest pained him, and he answered shortly when addressed by Lasso Sol.

Crossing the Rio Grande at a ford, late in the afternoon, Buffalo Bill came out upon a mesa to suddenly ride upon a couple of wagons and a half dozen horsemen.

There was no time for retreat, and yet he did not know just what the party would prove, friends or foes.

The cries of his prisoners, however, at once told him that they knew them, and Lasso Sol called out:

"Ho, pards, to the rescue! This man is

a renegade chief among the redskins, and has us foul."

There were five horsemen in the party, and two drivers, one to each wagon, and they all quickly surrounded the scout and his prisoners.

A glance into the faces of the men showed Buffalo Bill that he did not know one of them.

This appeared bad for him.

But he smiled complacently at the words of Lasso Sol, and said politely:

"Good afternoon, gentlemen."

All eyes were upon him, and the leader of the party said:

"What did yer say, Lasso Sol, and what is you three doing prisoners to one man?"

"I'll tell yer, and quick, pards."

"Ther Injuns raided the Bainbridge Ranch last night, and was led by a white man."

"They burned the cabins, kilt Bainbridge, his pretty wife, Little Tommy, ther two niggers, and ther two cowboys, and carried off all ther plunder."

"We, Barney, Reddy, and me, got onter ther trail of this man, but he had a Injun with him, and was too flip fer us, fer yer see how he has got us foul."

The eyes of the seven men were glittering now malignantly as they heard Lasso Sol's story, and their hands were upon the butts of their revolvers.

It looked very black for Buffalo Bill just then.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE MUZZLE OF A REVOLVER.

Buffalo Bill did not change countenance at the looks turned upon him, and the threatening attitude of the men.

He looked upon the men as just what they were, a party of settlers from the valley going down to Fort McRae to purchase supplies, for there was a trading post there.

Wholly unknown to them, they would naturally take the word of their comrades against his.

But he made up his mind not to yield, in spite of the odds, for he was not a man to give up when he knew he was right.

"Gentlemen, there are two sides to every story; you have heard one, now listen to mine."

Several demurred at this, and the three prisoners cried out against their friends listening to the accused, while one man sprung forward, knife in hand, to cut the bonds of Lasso Sol.

But quick as a flash Buffalo Bill's revolvers were in his hands, and one covering the man who held the knife.

"You attempt to free that man and I will kill you."

"I have a right to be heard, for I am a Government army officer, and have a right to be here."

The last words checked the hostile act of the men, while the one covered by the scout's revolver sneaked back into the crowd again.

"I say, men, he has a right to tell his story—let him talk," called out the leader.

There were voices against this, but one called out: "He's a Government officer, he says, pards, so don't make no mistake."

"Yes, go slow," cried another. Then the leader again spoke up.

"Yes, say your say, mister."

"It's a lie; he haint no Government officer, but a renegade."

"Why, he claims ter be Buffalo Bill," shouted Lasso Sol.

It was a mistake of Lasso Sol to utter

the name of the great scout, and he realized as much the moment he had spoken.

He saw each one of the party he looked to to rescue him take their hands quickly off their guns and gaze at the scout with something like awe.

"Yes, gentlemen, Lasso Sol has said aright, for I am Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts at Fort Laramie, and I am going to Fort McRae under orders.

"I rode into your valley, as I take you for settlers of Meadowland, to discover a youth standing by the ashes of his own happy home, and about him were the dead bodies of his loved ones.

"Other youths came up, and I left them, being in a hurry to reach the fort.

"Some miles down the valley I met the Indian chief whom you may know as Lone Buffalo the Redskin Hermit, and the friend of the whites.

"He was on his way to warn your settlement of the intended raid, but had mistaken the time.

"As I rode away, settlers were coming to the scene of the ruined home, and then three men followed me to take me a prisoner.

"I was the fortunate one, with the Indian's aid, and am carrying them to the fort to be sure that they will take my word for it next time that I am Buffalo Bill.

"Allow me to pass, please."

"All a lie!" shouted Lasso Sol.

"He's taking us to his retreat to hang us.

"Don't let him do it, pard!"

Several hands again fell upon their revolvers, and one of the men said:

"You've got to give these pards of ours up, for we know them as honest settlers.

"Hain't I talking right, boys?"

Several answered in the affirmative.

"I shall not give my prisoners up, for they must understand that they cannot attack a Government officer and call him a renegade to suit their humor.

"Stand back, there, sir, for I mean what I say—these men go with me!"

Buffalo Bill's story and manner had impressed some of the party.

But there were others aching for trouble, and they were going to get it if the scout had his way.

He saw how great were the odds against him; but he was not a man to be driven from his purpose.

He had his revolvers ready for use, and sat upon his horse unflinchingly.

That the first act of one to rescue the prisoners would bring one man to his death, the older heads knew when they looked at the scout, and the leader of the party said quickly:

"Have you anything to prove that you are who you say?"

"No, he haint.

"He's a fraud," shouted Lasso Sol.

"I have, sir, my name upon my weapons, my saddle, my sealed dispatches for Fort McRae, and several letters as well from my home and addressed to me at my headquarters post.

"Draw off your men and I will show you my proof."

"Men, we have made a mistake.

"This gentleman goes on his way," said the leader sternly, and yet there were several who dissented, and Lasso Sol shouted to be rescued.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DUEL ON THE TRAIL.

"You are wise, sir; but I thank you for coming to my aid," said Buffalo Bill to the leader of the party, who returned:

"It is not our wish to do a wrong, sir; but you have three of our men of the valley as prisoners, and it is a charge and countercharge, and so we were in a quandary as to which to believe; but I am sure you are who you say you are, for I have heard much of Buffalo Bill, and few men other than he would show the pluck you have just done."

"A man in the right, sir, will take big chances to go through; but let me show you my authority."

Still holding one of his revolvers in hand, the scout drew out a paper and handed it to the leader, who, with several others, glanced at it, while three of the party were whispering apart, as though not willing to be beaten out of their intention.

"This paper is satisfactory to me, sir, and all of us, I suppose," and he looked toward the whispering trio, while Lasso Sol called out:

"That paper is forged to help him in his devil's work.

"Any man kin have a paper."

This gave those who seemed determined to stand by him renewed courage, and one of them said:

"What does you intend to do with these men?"

"Take them to the fort."

"And then?"

"Turn them over to the keeping of the commandant."

"And then?"

Nettled by the manner of the man, the scout replied:

"I shall tell my story, and it will be believed without a word, while, if I am right that this man calling himself Lasso Sol is the one I once knew as Black Lariat up in Colorado, he will doubtless be hanged, while the other two go free."

All started at this, and Lasso Sol turned livid.

Several of the party had heard of Black Lariat, a noted desperado of the Colorado mines, and of his crimes.

"Yer don't take him with my consent," said the leader of those who wanted to free the prisoners.

"Gentlemen, if I free your settlement from such a man as I know Black Lariat to be, you will all have cause to thank me, for he is biding there in your valley for no good, as you would have found.

"It is seldom that I mistake a face; but I may be wrong in this instance; yet there are men at the fort who know Black Lariat well.

"If this man proves not to be that villain, he will go free with his pards, I having no apologies to offer after his attack on me."

"I say you don't take him," shouted the one who stood Lasso Sol's friend, and the latter gave a cheer and shouted:

"Stand by me, pards!"

"You stand alone, Burnett, if you take issue with the scout," said Mr. Colvin, the leader of the party.

"Well, I'll stand by a friend if you all do back down from one man," cried Burnett, and Buffalo Bill, glancing over the crowd, asked calmly:

"Do you make this a personal issue with me, sir?"

"I do."

"That means that you will take these men from me?"

"Yes; it means just that."

"Good for you, pard! I'll never forget you," yelled Lasso Sol, and the other two prisoners faintly cheered.

"Begin work at your will," said Buffalo Bill.

"You've got your gun drawn. Why

don't yer git down and fight it out like a man."

Several of the men answered this with a cheer.

Buffalo Bill said with the utmost coolness, addressing Mr. Colvin:

"I trust you, sir, will see fair play."

"I will, sir; but, Burnett, you are wrong in what you are doing."

"I am of age, and judge of my actions."

"All right.

"What is your will?"

"Step off twenty paces, put us at each end, back to back, and you give the word to turn and advance, emptying our guns as we go.

"Does that suit you, renegade?"

Several laughed at the man's calling Buffalo Bill renegade, and Lasso Sol just gave a whoop.

Buffalo Bill's face was as serene as moonlight, and he showed no anger at the insult, but said:

"It would be better for you to come on to the fort and find out your mistake than challenge me to this duel, for I do not want to kill you."

"Yes, that would be better," cried several.

But Lasso Sol cried out against it, and Burnett said:

"I am fighting to free my pards, and it goes that if I kill you that settles it."

"Yes, and if I kill you then you have brought your death upon yourself."

"You hain't got ther nerve, for I don't go under fer any man," and Mr. Colvin said in a low tone:

"He's the deadest of dead shots, sir, and quick as a flash."

"So am I," was the rejoinder, without the slightest show of boasting.

Mr. Colvin then stepped off the twenty paces, the settler took the end quickly that he deemed the best, and Buffalo Bill walked to the other stand.

Their revolvers were to remain undrawn from their belts until the word was given:

"Wheel and fire!"

Then they were to obey, wheeling, drawing their weapons as they did so, and firing as rapidly as they pleased.

Never did man look more confident than did Burnett, and never did man look so utterly indifferent of consequences as did Buffalo Bill, who said to Mr. Colvin:

"I will not kill him, but wing him in the hand."

All were silent now, and anxious, Lasso Sol painfully so.

Then came the words: "Wheel and fire!"

Two revolvers were heard, one following the other quickly, but the bullet of the latter flew wild, for the hand that held it had been shattered by Buffalo Bill's shot.

"I hope it will not prove serious, sir."

"Good day, gentlemen," and mounting his horse, the scout rode on with his prisoners, leaving his wounded foe groaning with agony and disappointment commingled.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ARRIVAL.

Buffalo Bill rode off as calmly from the group of settlers as though he had not just won a great victory with tremendous odds against him.

He passed the two six-mule wagons, turned out in the direction of the fort, and left behind him the band of men gathered around their wounded comrade, and doing what they could for him.

"We waked up the wrong passenger that time," said one.

"You bet, and there's no doubt as to his being Buffalo Bill after what we saw him do," another added, while a third remarked:

"Well, I never saw a man face what he did, and I don't want to see another, if I'm one of them he's facing."

In the meantime the scout had nothing to say in response to the questions put to him by Lasso Sol.

The latter rode first of the prisoners, just behind the scout, the length of a horse from him.

He was very pale, for the color had not returned to his face since he saw the fate of his champion, and realized that it all had been for nothing.

He was still a prisoner, and with more against him than before he had met the wagons.

Now, there was for him to consider that the scout intended to bring the charge against him that he was Black Lariat, the Desperado of the Colorado mines.

The chances were that there were men at Fort McRae who would recognize him as the Desperado.

"You men will have to put up with some hard riding, for we were detained back yonder an hour, and I intend to keep right on to the fort," said the scout, and he urged the horses on.

It was just sunset when he stopped at a stream to water the animals.

"I will tighten up the girths, relieve the horses of your weight for awhile, and see how nearly free some of you have gotten your hands," said Buffalo Bill.

Lasso Sol groaned, for had the scout ridden on a few miles further before stopping he would have been free.

One of his defenders had slipped a knife into his hands, he supposed unseen, and bound though he was, Lasso Sol had been working at his bonds and freed one hand.

When darkness came on that knife would have been passed back to one and then the other of the prisoners following, and at some unguarded moment, the three men would have dashed upon the scout and tried conclusions with him.

But Buffalo Bill had seen the knife slipped to Lasso Sol, and knew that he was working hard as he rode along to free himself.

The man was again bound, the girths were cinched up, and just at dark the way was resumed, the scout pressing on at a good pace.

The moon lighted their way, and true to his word the scout pressed on along the now well-marked trail until the lights of Fort McRae came into view just before dawn.

Answering the challenge, the reply was:

"Scout with dispatches and three prisoners."

He was soon admitted into the frontier post, and his prisoners put in the guardhouse, while his dispatches, not being urgent for quick delivery, he was given quarters and told to await to see the colonel in the morning.

Colonel Tipton had just finished his toilet when the arrival of the scout was reported, bringing both dispatches and prisoners.

"Why, Cody, is it you?"

"I am indeed glad to see you, while you being the dispatch bearer indicates that they are important," said Colonel Tipton, greeting the scout warmly, for Buffalo Bill had served with him in the Northwest.

"They were dispatches, sir, for the chain of posts, and General Birney sent me, sir, as I am on the search for a

mysterious individual who has been robbing the officers of half a dozen posts, and who is supposed to be either at McRae or Tule Rosa, colonel."

"I hope you may catch him; but what prisoners are those you brought in?" and Colonel Tipton was opening his dispatches while he talked.

In a calm way Buffalo Bill told the story of the destruction of the Bainbridge home and murder of the people, his meeting with the young Silver Stars, and being pursued by Lasso Sol and his two comrades, with what had followed.

"Well, Cody, you are a wonder, for you do escape death most miraculously, and what you undertake you accomplish."

"You certainly have done well; but I am pained to hear about this massacre, and will send a troop up the valley at once."

"May I ask, sir, that you do not, for there is a mystery about that raid that I wish to solve, and by going quietly about it I believe I can do so, while sending the soldiers would drive the villains into hiding."

"I have the Fighting Five for aides, one of them, as I told you, the last of the Bainbridge family, and they will aid me greatly, while the Lone Buffalo I can depend on, and he is now on the trail of the raiders."

"I guess you are right, Cody, and I will leave all to you."

"But now about these prisoners?"

"There are scouts here, sir, and troopers who know Black Lariat, and I wish to have them see the man Lasso Sol, and ask them who he is and where they saw him."

"I shall have them looked up at once."

But the very scouts Buffalo Bill had in mind were then off scouting with a troop of cavalry, in which were the soldiers who also knew Black Lariat.

Thus several days passed away before Lasso Sol was brought to confront those whom the scout felt sure would recognize him as the Desperado of the Colorado mines two years before, for he had mysteriously disappeared from his old haunts when he learned the military were to arrest him for his crimes.

CHAPTER XXI.

FACING THE MUSIC.

The settlers came in the next evening with their wagons, and went into camp near the post traders.

Almost the first man that greeted them was Buffalo Bill, and he was accompanied by the surgeon of the post, whom he had asked to go with him and do what he could for the man he had wounded in the duel.

Mr. Colvin received them cordially, and said:

"The boys hardly need the proof of seeing you here, sir, to be convinced that you are Buffalo Bill, and Burnett will be ashamed of himself when he hears you have brought the surgeon to see him."

"He is in the far wagon, and I will call him out."

Burnett crawled out of the wagon with assistance, and his face was pale and haggard, showing that he had suffered.

He looked sullenly at Buffalo Bill, but unheeding, the scout said pleasantly:

"Glad you have gotten in, pard, and the post surgeon is with me to put your hand in the best shape possible."

The man's face changed instantly, and he said:

"Thank you, sir."

"Ther cap'n drove faster to have me cared fer, as my hand is in a bad way."

"It was my fault, though, so I don't blame you, and Lasso Sol has been a good friend to me more than once."

"You were right to wish to help him then, for stick to one who helps you in a time of need."

"But the surgeon will see 'to your hand."

He did, and the forefinger was so tered it had to be taken off at the joint.

Burnett stood the amputation bravely, and was much relieved when the broken bone was gotten rid of, remarking coolly:

"It was my trigger finger, sir, and I'll have to train the next one now; but you are the quickest and best shot I ever saw, for Mr. Colvin told me you said you intended to wound me in the hand and not kill me."

"I owe you my life, sir, and I rather think I have got something to keep you in remembrance," and the man held up his bandaged hand.

"Come over to-morrow and see if I am not right about Lasso Sol being Black Lariat the Desperado," and Buffalo Bill returned with the surgeon to the post.

The next day at noon the troop returned, and after they had rested awhile Colonel Tipton called out the men designated by Buffalo Bill, scouts and soldiers, and one at a time had them led down to where the three prisoners had been drawn up to face the music.

The first man, a sergeant, was told to look well at the three men and say if he recognized any of them.

He glanced at Reddy and Barney, fastened his eyes upon the face of Lasso Sol and said:

"This man I have seen before, and he's the one I think he is there is no worse, sir."

"Who do you think he is, sergeant?"

"He has cut off his long hair, and let his beard grow; but if he is not the Colorado Desperado, Black Lariat, I am very much mistaken, sir."

Lasso Sol turned to the hue of a corpse and Mr. Colvin said to Burnett, who stood next to him:

"That settles it."

"See what the others say."

A scout then was called, eyed the three men and said:

"If I knows any, thet pilgrim are the one, and he oughter hev been hanged long ago, if it's who I thinks."

"Who do you say he is?"

"Black Lariat, sir, a Colorado bad 'un."

One soldier said he had seen Lasso Sol before, but could not say where.

Another of the soldiers said at once:

"That one is Black Lariat, sir."

Another soldier failed to recognize him until asked the name of a desperado of the Colorado mines, and called out quickly:

"Black Lariat, sir, and this is the man."

A scout then called: "Cut his beard off, give him a wig of long hair, take that scared look off his face, and if he ain't a man I thought dead I'll give my gun to him."

"Who?"

"A man by the nickname of Black Lariat, sir."

"If Buffalo Bill, our chief at Fort Lyon, was here, he'd know him, for he never forgot a face, sir, knew the difference between one Chinese and another," said the scout.

"Buffalo Bill is here, and he brought this man into the fort a prisoner, for he said that he was the desperado known as Black Lariat," said Colonel Tipton,

and Buffalo Bill was called, and the commandant continued.

"The two men unrecognized, Cody, and whom you asked to have released, are free to go; but this man I shall hold."

Barney and Reddy were only too glad to join the other settlers and go with them to their camp, to start on the return to the valley the next day; but Sol was sent back to the guardhouse to await an opportunity to send him, under guard, to Colorado to stand trial for his crimes.

"I'm not dead yet, Buffalo Bill, and some day we may meet again," called out the desperado, as they led him away to the guardhouse, where Mr. Colvin was allowed to visit him to arrange about his ranch and cattle in Meadowland Valley.

Buffalo Bill then began his preparations for his departure, and his first duty was to purchase a fine horse with provisions and ammunition, and a lot of useful presents, as he had promised, for Lone Buffalo, the Tonca Chief.

As he rode off on the trail the next day, leading his well-laden packhorse, he passed the settlers' outfit on its way home, and Mr. Colvin called out:

"Luck to you, Buffalo Bill, and remember you have many friends in Meadowland Valley, for Lasso Sol, we all know now, was there to one day deal us a cruel blow," and the settlers gave three cheers for the gallant scout, who raised his broad sombrero in recognition.

CHAPTER XXII.

PICKING UP THE SCATTERED TRAILS.

The young Silver Stars, when the settlers turned back after discovering the trail of the raiders to have branched off into a dozen, obeyed the instructions of the leader of the Fighting Five, and dropped out one by one.

Each youth was well mounted and armed, and supplied with his own haversack and food.

No one knew the country better than they, for they had roved over every mile of it for far about the settlement in carrying out their duty as a Ranger Guard of the valley.

So, one by one, the five started upon their separate ways, to follow the trails they deemed best.

Each one wisely made a sign on the trail, to show the others that he had taken that one, and not have two take the same way.

They were soon all four marching off from each other, and eagerly watching every sign they came upon to give them any clue regarding those they followed.

The scattered trails would indicate that Indians were the raiders, but the young rangers had such confidence in Buffalo Bill's assertion to the contrary that nothing could make them believe he was wrong.

While the four men were trailing, Bird Bainbridge was dashing back to his burned home to attend the funeral of his parents, little brother Sammy, and the others so ruthlessly slain.

His disappearance the next morning, with packhorse of supplies, will be recalled, while the kind settlers remained to build his home, as he had determined to live at the old place.

At a quick pace, Bird Bainbridge pressed on after his comrades, and, coming to the spot where the raiders had scattered, he found first one, then the other of the trails marked, showing which ones his pards had taken.

He quickly selected a fifth trail to follow, and set out upon it.

It was just nightfall when he was compelled to give up trailing, and halt until the morrow.

But he had made one important discovery only a few minutes before halting, and that was the fact that no less than three of the scattered trails had come together again.

On one of them that merged into the one he had been following he found a stake, which he at once recognized.

It simply showed that one of the Five was on one of the trails leading back into that he followed, and which seemed to be the principal one.

This told him that one of his rangers was now on the trail he was following, and had passed that point about noon of that day, so was half a dozen hours ahead of him.

Utterly prostrated for want of sleep, rest, and food, for he had eaten nothing when he had staked his horses out, he threw himself down upon his blankets, not caring for any supper.

He expected to have another night of sorrow like the past.

But his eyes closed in spite of him, and so deep was the slumber he sunk into that he did not awaken until dawn.

He was utterly amazed at himself, and he quickly rolled up his blankets, and wholly rested now, was hungry, so built a fire and had a good breakfast.

Saddling up, he pressed on his way once more, and at a good gait, to suddenly come upon the spot where the raiders had halted for the night.

He knew that, having scattered, they would not expect to be followed, and he did not doubt, as another trail joined the large one he was following, that he would find all of them come together again during the day.

This belief was carried out by seeing another trail merge into the one he was on soon after, and here he found another stake.

This told him that two of his Ferret Pards were then ahead of him on that very trail.

At noon another trail merged into the main one, and here again was another stake, so three of the five were now ahead of him, he knew, and his face brightened at the thought.

As the trail he had taken seemed to have been the main one, and taken a more direct course, he saw that the others of the five had traveled miles more than he had, and he had consequently gained upon them.

During the afternoon three more trails had joined the main one, and on one of them was another stake where it came in.

This told him that his four guards were now ahead of him, and having counted the trails where they had first scattered, Bird Bainbridge knew that when he found the spot where another came into the one he was on it would be the last one.

All had united now save one.

As he had come along he had picked up every clue, especially at the camps, and the more he had seen, the more he was convinced that Buffalo Bill had made no mistake when he said that white men, not Indians, had been the raiders of Bonaventura Ranch.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOUND.

As Bird Bainbridge progressed upon his way, picking up the scattered trails, he pushed his horses to a good pace, hoping to catch up with his pards by nightfall.

He saw that the nature of the country

was ranging; he was coming to arid plateaus, and where the trail was not easy to follow.

This told him that the boys ahead had had slower work of it than had fallen to his lot, for they had in many ways left what signs they could for him to more rapidly follow them.

One thing, however, worried him—the missing trail had not yet merged into the main one.

He had made no miscount, he knew; one trail was missing!

Whoever had taken it had not yet come back to the main one.

The country he was now in was strange to the young trailer. He had once, with his pards, penetrated northward, by another trail, to the Arizona line, just where the Little Colorado River crossed it, and the boys had hunted and fished there for a week, for game was plentiful.

This was the old camp which had been made the rendezvous for the Fighting Five, for Bird had an idea that the raiders had their haunts in the Little Colorado country.

That the Five dare not attempt to fight the raiders when found the young leader well knew. He merely wished to track them to their haunt, and then be able to lead Buffalo Bill there, leaving the rest for the scout.

With the night Bird camped on the shore of a tiny lake, surrounded by cedars, and where there was fairly good grass for the horses.

Again tired nature demanded rest, and once more he slept soundly, thus regaining his strength through the "sweet restorer," sleep.

He ate a good supper and enjoyed his breakfast, for the tax upon his energies demanded it.

His grief was just as poignant, but he had settled into the determination not to yield to it, to be a man, and one day strike the blow to avenge that he had sworn to.

Bright and early he was again in the saddle. The trail, which he had followed near the Rio Grande thus far, branching off to the westward toward the Little Colorado.

Through a barren country it now led, and when the tracks of the horses of his pards were visible, he could see that they were going very slow, for it was difficult, except here and there, to follow the trail of the raiders.

When plainly seen there were the tracks of all the animals, as far as could be judged, that the raiders had left the Meadowland Valley with.

Whether the missing trail had yet come into the other Bird Bainbridge was not sure, for it might have done so where the soil was too barren to leave a trace.

On he went, feeling pretty certain that he would at least come up with the four pards by noon, and they could tell about how far ahead the raiders were.

He grew a little anxious, fearing that the youngsters might have pressed the raiders too close, and he knew what would follow, for the Five to be caught by superior numbers thus far from home and help.

The more he thought of this the more it troubled him; so he increased his pace and moved on at a canter, only here and there able to detect any trail in the rocky soil.

A short halt was made at noon for the sake of the horses, not himself. Then the ride was renewed and the rapid pace kept up by the resolute youth.

It was near sunset when Bird Bainbridge ascended a rocky ridge covered with scattered cedars.

"When I get up there I can see far ahead," he concluded, and he urged the horses into a gallop.

As he neared the hill he suddenly saw horsemen appear upon the summit, and gave a cheer as he recognized his four comrades.

But they neither heard him nor saw him; they appeared to be bewildered, riding about in a most unmethodic way, which Bird could not understand.

At last one of them gave a shout; whereupon the others dashed toward him and were seen to quickly dismount.

Then the young leader realized what the trouble was; they were being pursued, and had been scattering to find an advantageous position in which to entrench themselves.

The spot found was on the highest point of the ridge, right where there was a pile of rocks thrown up like a fort.

They rode into or behind the rocks and their horses were not visible.

Spurring up the ridge toward the spot, Bird Bainbridge was seen by his comrades and a wild cheer greeted him.

The next moment he, too, dashed into the little fort, and then he knew the truth, for pressing back over the trail, in hot pursuit, were a score of horsemen, and not half a mile away.

They were the Red-handed Raiders of Bonaventura Ranch!

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNDER SIEGE.

The sight that met the brave young leader of the Five was not reassuring.

The position had once been a place of defense, not long before. Big stones had been thrown together and put in position, forming a breastwork six feet in height and the space behind large enough to conceal the horses of the boy braves and themselves.

That those who had fought there before had met a sad fate was shown by a dozen bleached skeletons lying within the enclosure—a mute witness but a sad one.

There was one opening to the aisle of stones through which the horses could enter, where the rocks had been pulled down or had fallen.

This gap the alert boys quickly closed up.

That the Five had halted there the raiders did not seem to believe, for they were pressing rapidly on up the hill, evidently expecting to catch them on the open plain beyond.

The young captain was welcomed with a joy which made his heart glad, but there was no time then for questions to be asked and answered.

"Boys, I have plenty to eat; ammunition enough also, and three canteens of water. We must stand them off as best we can and shoot to kill every time.

"Be ready to give it to them just as soon as they come within range. Each one should get his man; that is the only way to cut down the number against us.

"Are you ready?"

"All ready," was the answer, and leaving their horses saddled as they were, the boy braves quickly had their rifles on the ready.

The trail, such as it was, led over the ridge a hundred yards from the little stone fortress. Along this the raiders were riding, their horses on the run.

Reaching the top of the ridge, and seeing nothing of those they pursued

flying along the plain, as they had expected, they drew rein in surprise.

At that moment Bird Bainbridge said:

"They are those who raided my home, for I see several of our horses yonder, and one man is riding my father's saddle.

"I will take him—Fire!"

The five rifles flashed almost as one.

The man whom the young leader had picked out fell dead from the saddle and one other dropped from his horse.

One man was wounded badly, as could be seen, and one horse dropped dead, another being hit hard, for he dashed off with his rider.

Every one of the shots of the Five had told, though not as well as could have been wished, owing to the excitement of the marksmen. The raiders had just suspected that their foes were in hiding in the rock fort, and were turning to charge it when the volley came.

The shots, as was expected, threw the raiders into disorder, and for a moment they hardly knew what to do, but one called out to charge the fort, and this they did.

But the defenders opened with their revolvers, and the raiders, with the loss of one man killed, another wounded, and a couple of horses struck hard, turned and rode rapidly out of range.

Watching them, the Five saw them talking excitedly for a few minutes; then the whole band went into camp in a cedar thicket, while one man led their horses down into the valley beyond, the Little Colorado flowing only a short distance away.

The raiders were seen to divide in two columns, one going one side of the little fortress, the other rounding it so as to completely encompass it.

The men, counted now to be thirteen in number, sought rocks for refuge to take positions around the fort and besiege it.

They seemed to be sure of their game now, the idea being to simply starve them out for water.

One other man, down with the horses in the valley, made the number fourteen, but a fifteenth was discerned in the cedars apparently their leader.

Three dead bodies lay upon the field, and several wounded men reclined upon blankets in the cedars.

"They are easily three to one against us, boys, but we hold the position on them.

"It is simply a case of siege, and we'll see how long we can stand it," remarked Bird Bainbridge, quite at his ease.

Then the boys each told how they had followed the respective trails they were on, and thus had all come together again.

They had gone over the ridge intending to camp on the river for the night, when, suddenly, they had discovered the raiders already encamped below on the river; so, there was nothing to do but to skip, which they had done, making for the hill crest, where their leader had found them.

Thus beleaguered, the boys made the best of their situation, and first strengthened it by filling up crevices in rocks, and so making their fortress as secure as hands could make it.

The horses were unsaddled and kept in one corner, the blankets were spread for beds, and the supplies were produced.

Food they had in plenty, but no fire to cook it with.

Fortunately, each of the Five had his canteen filled, and this water might have

to last them for a long time, but their poor horses must be the sufferers.

"We can turn them out when they can stand it no longer, and if those wretches take this fort, our bones will be here with these around us, to show that we fought to the last," said Bird Bainbridge; there was no blanching of faces or tremors of heart among his comrades; they would live or die together.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE UNSEEN ALLY.

Supper was eaten by the Fighting Five; then all went on watch for awhile, it being decided that two must be on guard all night.

It would be moonlight soon, but until it was, the darkness might tempt the raiders to make an advance quietly, and then a rush.

That this was attempted a shot soon revealed, for Seth Saunders had discerned a moving object and had promptly fired upon it.

A yell of agony followed; rushing feet were heard; then another shot, that time by Bird Bainbridge, a moan following, and after that utter silence.

There was another shot in the night late, when one of the raiders attempted to remove the dead.

Rud Rainey fired the shot, and another raider remained on the field with the dead.

The night finally passed, but day-break revealed that the raiders were still in position around the stone stronghold of the dauntless Five.

They were seen to go by twos to breakfast in the camp in the cedars, and their horses were visible grazing in the valley beyond, a guard with them.

So the whole day passed in perfect quietness, the boys on incessant watch, ready for any demonstration. But the enemy made no move, up to nightfall.

In the darkness which came before moonrise, a feint of attack was made by the raiders, but not carried out.

The moon was well up when, to the surprise of the beleaguered boys, a shot flashed out in the valley, and there was heard the sound of troops at a gallop.

Had some one fired upon the guard and run off with the horses?

The raiders were heard calling to each other excitedly, and soon after, in the still, rarified air, a distant voice shouted:

"They have killed Buster and stampeded all the horses! They've got some pards outside the fort!"

The Fighting Five cheered lustily, and were joyous over what they heard.

But, who could be their friend?

"It must be Buffalo Bill," cried one.

But the others shook their heads.

"It is probably true; for if he left the fort soon after his arrival and was going by Fort Tule Rosa Wingate his trail would lead near here," said Bird Bainbridge.

Soon after midnight the watchers in the fort were startled by another shot.

Nick Walters and Kane Noland, who were on guard, reported that they had seen a rifle's flash a couple of hundred yards from the camp in the cedars.

That the shot had told on some one in the camp the excitement there sufficiently showed.

Who could be this unknown friend?

The rest of the night was a most uneasy one for the besiegers, but one of intense expectancy to the boys in the fort.

Morning came at last, and the Fighting Five then discovered that the raiders' horses were not in the valley. Had they been stampeded by the lone shot?

Their foes still surrounded the position; they at least had not been stampeded. Would the solitary marksman come again, to the raiders' dismay?

So the brave boys fondly hoped, and kept on the watch for every movement; but nothing transpired all that day; the enemy was not disturbed.

The plunder seen in the camp in the cedars Bird Bainbridge knew to have been taken from his home, and he felt all the more merciless toward the men he had to fight.

Another night came, and in the darkness preceding the rising of the moon another flash was seen, another shot was heard.

Their unseen ally was still at work!

A dozen shots quickly followed, fired from the camp, evidently aimed toward the spot where the unseen ally of the boys had been.

"I do hope none of those bullets hit him," said Bird, anxiously.

Then they began to count. If the three shots fired by their solitary friend had each killed a raider, the band had been reduced by seven killed and several wounded.

At midnight another shot rang out, sharply, on the clear night air, now still nearer to the camp in the cedars.

The delighted lads responded with a cheer, which told their unseen friend that all was yet well with them!

"It must be Buffalo Bill," decided Bird, and all agreed with him.

Thus another night passed away.

The water was by that time almost gone from the canteens, and the horses were intensely suffering of thirst and hunger.

No food or water had they had, and the Five decided that the next morning they would turn the animals loose, to go to the valley for grass and to the river to quench their thirst.

As the besiegers kept themselves out of sight, the lads could not tell whether any more had been killed or wounded until the march to their camp kitchen, by twos, for their meals was observed.

"Yes, our invisible pard is cutting them off," announced Bird, after a careful watch and count; "he is killing them off one by one."

All then were inspired with the hope that the raiders would soon have left the siege and depart. So the Five kept in their horses and waited.

Again night fell, and hardly had it done so when both the besieged Five and the raiders were startled by a dozen shots ringing out in rapid succession!

And the shots were turned upon the raiders' camp in the cedars!

"That is Buffalo Bill! It is his terrible repeating rifle!" shouted Bird Bainbridge, and the Five screamed themselves hoarse with their welcome.

CHAPTER XXVI. AVENGED AT LAST.

When Buffalo Bill left Fort McRae he held on his way along the trail leading to Meadowland Valley until he came to where it branched off toward Fort Tule Rosa.

This fort was reached without incident and only a short halt made there.

Then the scout pulled out almost due north to cross the Zuni Plateau and reach Deep Spring, the rendezvous appointed with the Lone Buffalo.

He did not doubt but that the Indian would be there with some information of the raiders.

Expecting to halt at Deep Spring for a good rest, he pushed on rapidly for

that point, and as he drew near it, late one afternoon, he was surprised to see some horses grazing ahead in a little meadow, not far from the Little Colorado.

Almost instantly he noticed a horseman coming toward him.

"It is the Lone Buffalo, and he has got a big drove of horses in some way," said the scout.

Soon after the two met, and the Indian's face was all aglow at what he had to tell.

He had followed a trail of the raiders, and had discovered, several days before, that they were encamped on the Little Colorado.

He had hardly made this discovery, watching them from a ridge, when he saw a party of four horsemen ascending the ridge, and far back over the plain was a single horseman with an animal in lead.

He could not warn the party from where he was, though he had recognized the young Silver Star who had come to Buffalo Bill and himself upon the trail.

He saw them going right upon the outlaw camp.

Then followed the discovery, the flight to the fort, the coming up of the single horseman and the pursuit of the raiders.

"How many?"

The Indian held up his hand four times to indicate twenty.

"Rather a large force, but what did you do then?"

"Me help," was the reply.

Encouraged to talk by the scout, Lone Buffalo went on to tell how the Five had stood the raiders off, and he, having fully reconnoitred the position, decided to pick the raiders off as he could.

Then he related about the killing of the guard over the horses and stampeding all the animals, bringing them to where they were then grazing.

He told of his continued good work, and added how glad he was to see the scout, for together they could stampede the outlaws.

"We must do better than that, Lone Buffalo; we must wipe them out!"

"Such cutthroats as they deserve no mercy, and that brave boy will be avenged sooner than we thought."

"He has already done good work toward it himself, from your account, though he was reckless to push on so far after so large a band."

"But he is here now with his brave pard; the raiders of his home, the slayers of his people, are all here, and so, too, are we, Lone Buffalo!"

"Let us do our best to wipe out that band of outlaws, and now decide upon our plan to do it," and the scout's words and manner showed that he was moved to the quick and in deadly earnest.

The result of the powwow with Lone Buffalo was that half a dozen effigies to represent men, were made and put on the horses and fastened there, Buffalo Bill finding that the Indian had bridled and saddled every outlaw's horse before killing the guard and stampeding the animals!

When they moved toward the camp in the cedars, after dark, it certainly appeared to be half a dozen horsemen following the scout and the redskin.

Leaving the "dummy" horsemen to be brought up by the Lone Buffalo, the scout crept to a spot near the camp in the cedars, and opened with his repeating rifle.

The effect was startling, and when the Indian came dashing up with his horsemen the rising moon revealing them, the scout shouted in commanding tones:

"Troopers, charge!"

The outlaws were panic-stricken and fled, while the Fighting Five dashed out of their fort, mounted upon their ponies, weak though they were, and joined the pursuit.

Driven to bay in the plain below, the ranch terrors fired a volley, that wounded Bird Bainbridge and the Indian slightly, and killed two ponies; but the answering fire caused them to shriek for mercy.

Five of the desperadoes were made prisoners, and were quickly led toward the camp on the Little Colorado, where wood, water and grass could be had in abundance.

It was midnight before the other horses were brought up and the camp fires built, when supper was prepared and the Five went at it as they had fought—with a vengeance.

The next day and night were spent in camp for rest, and the next morning the Fighting Five parted company with the gallant scout and Lone Buffalo, Bird Bainbridge saying with deep emotion:

"Through you, Mr. Cody, I have avenged my dead. God bless you and preserve you for other good work!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

Buffalo Bill held on his way to Fort Wingate, to continue on in his remarkable career as the King of the Border.

The Lone Buffalo, loaded down with the presents Buffalo Bill had brought him, among them a repeating rifle, and things given him by Bird Bainbridge from the booty recaptured from the outlaws, started for his retreat in the mountains, four ponies carrying his outfit. There he continued to live, and was known as the Hermit Redskin.

The Fighting Five, with their prisoners, equaling them in number, and the booty packed on the recaptured and captured ponies, started for home.

The dead outlaws had been buried, and the five prisoners almost wished that they had shared the fate of their evil comrades—that it was all over with before the settlers could wreak their vengeance.

It was a slow ride back to Meadowland Valley, but one day at noon the cavalcade reached the ranch, and Bird saw what his kind and sympathetic friends had done for him. On their arrival word was sent down the valley to summon the settlers, who speedily assembled. A judge and jury were quickly found; the trial of the five prisoners followed, then their execution, for their sentence was to be hanged.

From that day Buffalo Bill's Fighting Five became known as the patrol of the valley, and from one end to the other the settlers revered the name of Col. William F. Cody, the Chief of Scouts.

THE END.

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